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THE ALL NEW G SERIES

Modern retro – that’s the thinking behind the new Audio Research G Series. It pays tribute to the original designs of company founder William Z. Johnson, while at the same time encapsulating the very latest thinking on tube amplifier design. Welcome siblings to this famous family, sitting comfortably alongside it’s already legendary Reference range.

It makes use of an all new output tube, the Tung Sol KT150: from the company responsible for the famous 6550, launched 60 years ago, this new design is destined to find a place throughout the Audio Research range.

Three new models lead off the G Series. The GSPre preamplifier, with it’s internal tube-powered phono stage and integrated headphone amplifier. The powerhouse GS150 stereo power amplifier, capable of 155W per channel and the GSi75 integrated amplifier, combining many of the attributes of the preamp and power amp in a single chassis, and delivering 75W per channel.

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Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News (November 2015)

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

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Artera is a new range of audio electronics from QUAD, fusing 79 years of sonic experience with cutting-edge technology and crisp, clean styling that both evokes the past and looks forward to the future.

The Artera Play is a CD player, DAC and preamp combined in a single elegant chassis. Incorporating state-of-the-art circuitry, its performance extends to ultra-high-resolution playback with an array of digital and analogue inputs. Its perfect partner is the Artera Stereo, a compact yet potent power amplifier delivering 140W per channel and sporting the latest iteration of QUAD's famous Current Dumping topology – the only amp design to have earned a Queen's Award for Technological Achievement.

Combining the assurance of tradition with the buzz of innovation, QUAD Artera is the lifeblood of high-performance audio entertainment for modern music lovers. Visit QUAD's new website at quad-hifi.co.uk to find out more.





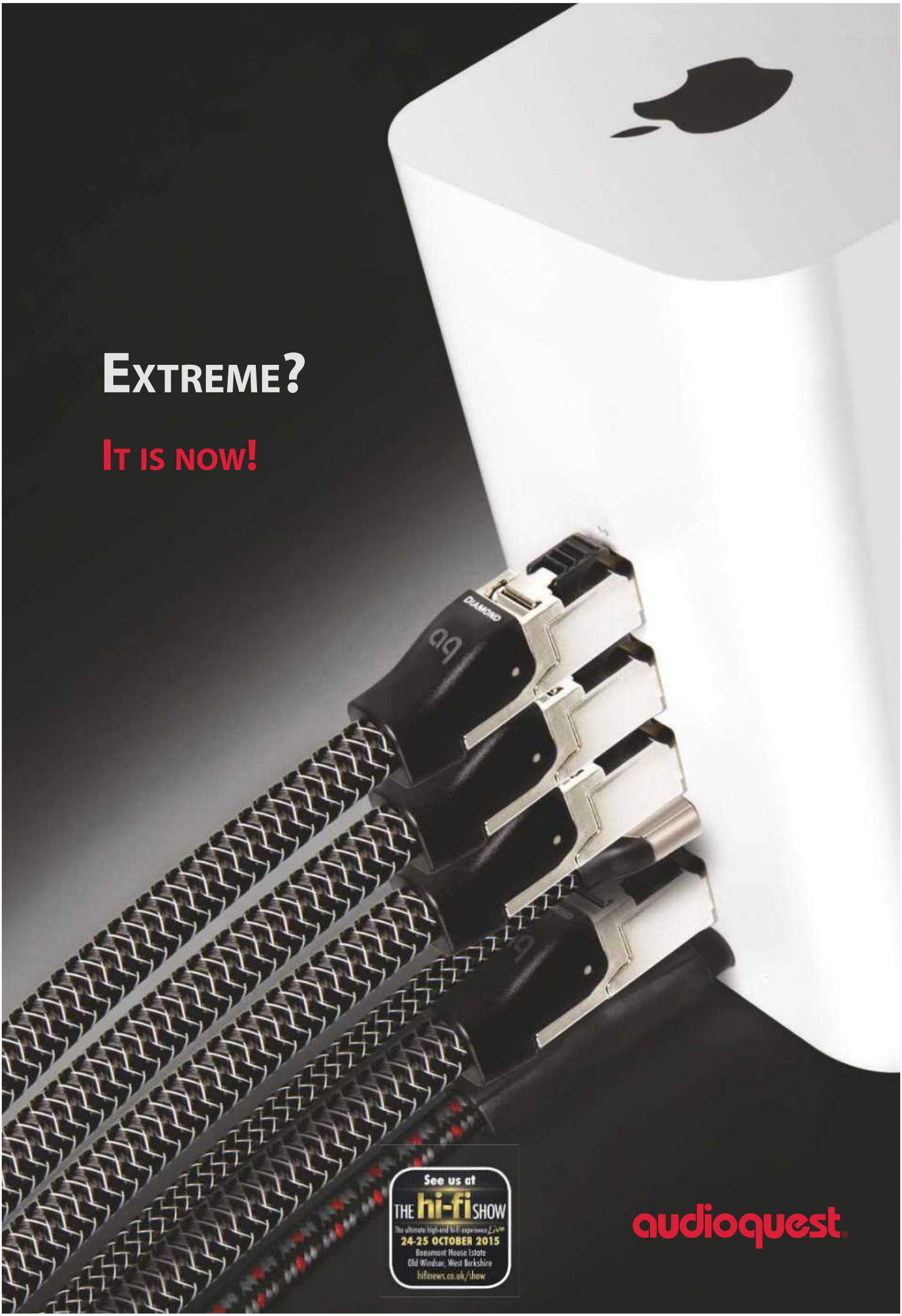
QUAD Artera Play and Stereo pictured with QUAD S2 speakers

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YEARBOOK/15



ABOVE: Vinyl supremacy, SME-style, with the Model 15 turntable (p29)

RIGHT: Mark Levinson's powerful, USB DAC-equipped amp features on p55

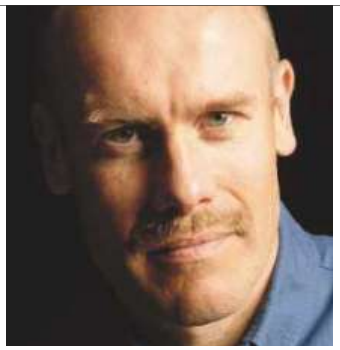




MUSIC: Bob Dylan's *The Times...* is reissued on two heavyweight 45rpm LPs (p139) while Mark Knopfler's *Tracker* (192kHz/24-bit download) mixes rock, Celtic and country influences (p145)

RIGHT: *Hi-Fi News & RR* is the exclusive UK representative of EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group. Editor Paul Miller is EISA's Hi-Fi Group Manager and President-elect





Christmas has come a little early this year as *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* celebrates the most memorable equipment and music from 2015. Few of the 60-odd goodies reviewed in this special Yearbook issue could be described as stocking-fillers but it's certainly worth leaving your mag open at a choice page in case a particularly benevolent Santa should be watching in the run up to the festive season.

Of course, dreaming about that next upgrade is part and parcel of our shared passion. That and listening to fabulous music from hi-res analogue and digital sources while leafing through this bumper 172-page issue – a feast of the most delectable source components, amps, headphones and loudspeakers from across the globe.

'Join us on Oct 24-25th as our Yearbook pages come alive with music'

We've also more than a few vintage audio heroes on show to remind us of hi-fi's deep roots together with a piquant selection from our Budget Esoterica series, proving there's some very affordable hardware ready and eager to tempt our musical tastebuds.

Our music pages reflect the growth in 'virtual media' as the high-res download sites continue to expand the territories they service. As the likes of *hdtracks.com* and *highresaudio.com* extend their reach, the SACD fraternity has been reinforced by the success of sites like *nativedsd.com*. The concept of 'high-res on the hoof' is also gaining traction thanks to the efforts of Tidal and, in the future perhaps, Meridian's MQA.

At the same time turntables and the heavyweight LP also continue to flourish in this virtual world. We've never had so many fabulously-engineered turntable designs grace our Yearbook.

So why not join us on 24th-25th October at our high-end Hi-Fi Show *Live* in Windsor as our pages come alive with music and you can witness many of these amazing products in action. It's not too late to purchase advance tickets via *www.eventbrite.co.uk* (search for The Hi-Fi Show 2015) or see *www.hifinews.co.uk/show* for more details.

PAUL MILLER GROUP EDITOR

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Investigative journalist supreme, Barry is the first with news of the latest developments in hi-fi and music technologies



JOHN BAMFORD
JB brings huge industry experience, a penchant for massive speakers and a love of high-res audio in all its diverse guises



KEN KESSLER
is currently our Senior Contributing Editor and almost singularly responsible for the renaissance in valves and 'vintage hi-fi'



KEITH HOWARD
has written about hi-fi for 30 years, and edited *Hi-Fi Answers* for nine. KH performs our speaker and headphone lab tests



STEVE HARRIS
Former Editor of this very title from 1986 through to 2005. A lifetime in audio and a love of jazz makes Steve a goldmine



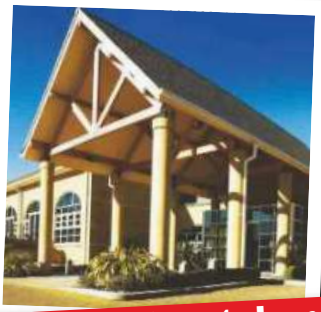
ANDREW EVERARD
has reviewed hi-fi for over 30 years and is still effortlessly enthusiastic about new technology, kit and discovering new music



STEVE SUTHERLAND
worked on *Melody Maker* and then edited *NME* from 1992-2000, the Britpop years. Steve brings a unique slant to our Vinyl Release pages

THE hi-fi SHOW Live 2015

Now in its third year, with more exhibits than ever, the UK's only high-end audio show continues to gather pace as the 'who's who' of world-class hi-fi plan their debuts



24th-25th October

Tickets are on sale until 23rd October for the UK's premier high-end audio event – The Hi-Fi Show *Live* at the Beaumont Estate, Old Windsor on Sat 24th and Sun 25th Oct 2015. Tickets cost £20 (£30 for a weekend pass) via *www.eventbrite.co.uk* or via the link on our website.

Concessionary £15 day passes are available to *Hi-Fi News* subscribers on 0844 848 8822 or by visiting *www.myhobbystore.co.uk/contact/* and filling out a request form. Please return regularly to *www.hifinews.co.uk/show* for updates.



Courtesy of Decent Audio, the Hi-Fi Show *Live* will reveal the brand new 'baby' turntable from Kronos – the Sparta .5 (point five) fitted with Kronos' own Helena tonearm. Come and hear it alongside Van den Hul's state-of-the-art Grail phonostage and hand-built Crimson MC cartridge

Some three years after the launch of Sonus faber's well-received Venere loudspeakers [*HFN* Dec '13 and Mar '14], the range is now joined by a stunning flagship, dubbed the Venere Signature. Taller and heavier than the Venere 3.0 and featuring a revised floor-firing reflex port, the three-way Signature will be unveiled alongside PrimaLuna's DiaLogue HP range of tube amps at the Hi-Fi Show *Live*





Dan D'Agostino's line-up now includes the Momentum Lifestyle Amplifier, dubbed the MLife. This extraordinary new integrated DAC/amp with comprehensive wireless streaming facilities will be premiered at the Hi-Fi Show *Live*



At the Hi-Fi Show *Live* Kudos Audio will be demonstrating a full Linn Exakt system, featuring a pair of its new flagship Titan 808 floorstanders in full active mode. Fasten your belts for an amazing, musical rollercoaster ride!



Alongside its Hugo TT DAC/headphone amp and flagship DAC [DAVE – previewed in *HFN* Aug '15], Chord Electronics will also demo its new 60W Mezzo MkII power amp from the stylish Choral range. Chord Electronics will also be unveiling a new headphone product at the Hi-Fi Show *Live*...

Alongside Icon Audio's impressive valve amps, ranging from the entry-level Stereo 20pp up to the gargantuan MB81 monoblocks, this UK brand will also be demonstrating its FRM2 loudspeaker [right]. Featuring just one full-range 8in drive unit, it promises the 'dynamic immediacy of a live musical event'





Hi-Fi News provided its exclusive, full technical review of the remarkable 'optical' DS-W1 pick-up in the Nov '15 issue. Based on technology developed for the optical mouse, the DS-W1 cartridge looks at the grooves on your LPs and declares: 'Let there be light!' Prepare for illumination at the Hi-Fi Show *Live*...



TICKETS ON SALE NOW

Ever wondered what one of the world's largest high-end amplifiers can deliver? Wonder no more as you sit in front of Magico's new S7 loudspeakers powered by Constellation Audio's Virgo III preamp and mighty Hercules II stereo power amp, rated at 550W/8ohm



The Hi-Fi Show *Live* is eagerly anticpating the world preview of JBL's 4367 studio monitor [above]. The flagship of three new compression driver speakers, the 4367 is based on the vaunted JBL Professional M2. This awesome monitor is expected to launch in 2016, but you can hear it first with us



Unveiled alongside Quad's new Artera Play/Stereo CD player/DAC/amplifier combo [*HFN* Nov '15], this most revered of UK marques will also pull the wraps off its Z4 floorstander from the stunning, soon-to-be-launched Z Series



Big on performance but economical on space, Magneplanar's new 0.7 [left] is a scaled-down version of the ever-popular 1.7. Like its bigger brother, the 0.7 is a full range 'quasi ribbon' panel loudspeaker that employs a very thin film backing to hold the delicate metallic foil ribbon array in place. No cone, no surround, no box – come and experience the iconic 'Maggie' sound at the Hi-Fi Show *Live*

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hi-finews & Record Review

Workshops



Keith Howard
Hi-Fi News magazine



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Hi-Fi News magazine

Editors and key contributors will present a series of *Hi-Fi News* Workshops, hosted by exhibiting manufacturers. With topics ranging from the sound of vintage CD; FLAC vs. WAV files; balanced and single-ended headphone drive, there'll be a subject for every audiophile

USA, Las Vegas – CES

HI-FI NEWS SHOWBLOG

One of the advantages of being the oldest hi-fi magazine in the world is that we've had time to station our reporters in audiophile hot-spots across the globe, eager to file stories from the biggest shows. Every month we offer our Showblog from a major international event somewhere in the world, including CES in Las Vegas and the High End Show in Munich through to the annual shows in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Portugal in addition to our very own *Hi-Fi News* show in Windsor [see p16]. Our Showblogs provide a unique glimpse of the world's latest and tastiest hi-fi, all from the comfort of your armchair!



SAE is back with a beast of an amp! The 2HP is so-named because it's said to deliver 2x746W, or 'one horsepower per fully differential push/pull channel'. Another claim is that it is the quietest amplifier ever made, the engineers allegedly measuring it as having a >128dB signal-to-noise ratio. Our picture shows a prototype with polished steel fascia, but it's unlikely to reach production any time soon. *www.hear-sae.com*



Powered by a pair of Krell Solo 375 amplifiers, the new MartinLogan Neolith hybrid electrostatics were delivering a suitably colossal sound. A combination of 15in and 12in woofers are married to a 48x22in mid/high frequency CLS XStat panel above 400Hz. *www.martinlogan.com*



A time-honoured agreement between Michell Engineering and Germany's Transrotor has prevented the distribution of the latter's comprehensive turntable range in the UK. This huge machine is a Special Edition version of the Tourbillon and features an acrylic/alloy sandwich chassis with a chromed metal platter in place of the 80mm transparent acrylic platter used in the standard version. *www.transrotor.de*



Described by Antelope Audio as the world's first 'atomic ADC/DAC' – it uses a super-precise 10MHz rubidium clock – the Rubicon supports DSD128 and 384kHz/24-bit LPCM via its USB input. A transformer/J-FET based phono stage and headphone amp are also included. *www.antelopeaudio.com*



Miura-san of Air Tight showed the PC-1 Magnum Opus, coming in at the pinnacle of the range with new, curvy body shape and a commensurate price tag. At $15,000, it joins the rarefied strata of certain bespoke Koetsus and the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement. We've reviewed two of Miura-san's cartridges in the past, and eagerly await this version. *www.airtight-anm.com*

UK, Windsor – Hi-Fi Show



Heard alongside a very fine series of front-end components, including an Oracle Delphi turntable, TAD DA1000 DAC and TAD C600/M2500 pre/power combination, the Brodmann Acoustics JB155 floorstander, seen here with Bernd Gruhn, did a grand job of filling this huge Suite with music. The smaller Festival F1 is pictured adjacent. *www.brodmann.at*



Here's Irv Gross with Constellation Audio's spectacular £33k Cygnus DAC Server, seen here with Metronome's Kalista Ultimate Signature transport/DAC/PSU combo [*HFN* Dec '13]. However, Constellation's Inspiration Series pre and Stereo power amps (£10k each) were the real stars [p63], delivering a jaw-dropping sound via Magico S5s. *www.constellationaudio.com*



Chris Green of Sound Fowndations showcased Clearaudio's Master Innovation turntable with floating platter, priced at £16k. It was fitted with the £15.5k Statement TT1i parallel tracking tonearm and placed on the matching £8k Olymp stand. Heard through GamuT pre/power amps and speakers, it had visitors glued to their seats. *www.soundfowndations.com*

Kevin Akam of Signature Audio Systems with PS Audio's sprightly 50W Sprout integrated amp, priced £650, and partnered with Vandersteen Model 1Ci speakers at £1300. A second system featuring PS Audio's £5250 DirectStream DAC, Jeff Rowland 525 monoblocks (£3999) and Vandersteen's Treo speakers ensured the room was packed with visitors. *www.signaturesystems.co.uk*



Japanese company Melco made its UK debut as Alan Ainslie showed off the revived '70s audiophile name with two digital music storage solutions, backed by Buffalo Technology know-how. The £6200 N1Z packs a 1TB SSD drive (expandable) while the N1A [p43] comes with a 4TB traditional HDD and costs £1650. Both serve as dedicated network and USB audio hubs. *http://melco-audio.com*



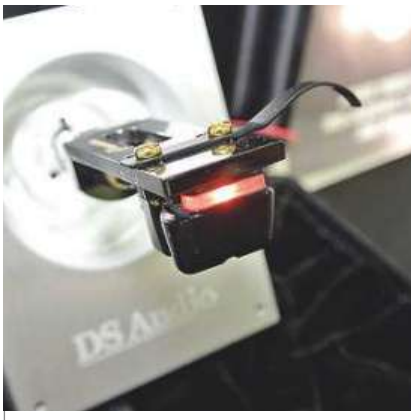


Here Primare's Siemen Algra shows off the company's 60 Series pre/power combo [*HFN* Nov '14]. The PRE60 preamp hosts a 192kHz/24-bit DAC/media board, while the companion A60 stereo power amp is rated at 2x250W. Priced £6500 apiece and partnered here with Revel's £4750 Performa F208 floorstanders, the duo wowed visitors. *www.karma-av.co.uk*

Germany – Munich Show



Reviewer Michael Fremer (left) and Bé Yamamura stand in front of the latter's massive steel horn speakers, described in depth in *HFN* Dec '13. Bé was present to show, too, the new YC Digital system consisting of the YC-1 music server, YC-2 192K digital audio interface and YC-3 192K DAC, also described in the *HFN* article. *www.yamamuracrawley.com*



At a show awash with new cartridges, many were in awe of DS Audio's DS-W1 'Nightrider' Optical Phono Cartridge and Equaliser [p34]. Shades of the 1960s – only now the technology benefits from the low temperature LED technology developed for the optical mouse and guitar pick-ups. *www.ds-audio-w.biz*

This was the first thing we saw upon entering the High-End show, one of the most over-the-top turntables ever. Construction of Acoustic Signature's Invictus is flawless – it accepts four arms, the platter is a three-layer aluminium/brass sandwich and the parts count is 479. The huge platter is driven by six motors and comes on a dedicated stand that's above waist-height – at least, for our 5ft 8in reporter. *www.acoustic-signature.com*





Astell&Kern showed two new digital players at both ends of the spectrum, the AK380 costing ~£3k, and this, the AK Jr. At just ~£400 it delivers that A&K 192kHz/24-bit quality in a package smaller and lighter than an iPhone 5. It's gorgeous, all-metal, sleek, easy-to-use and supplied with 64GB of internal memory. The AK380 services up to 384kHz/32-bit, and comes with 256GB of internal memory! *www.astellnkern.com*

AudioValve reminded *arrivistes* that it has been producing standalone all-tube headphone amps for over 30 years! The latest, the Luminare, is an OTL design with external power supply, said to handle any headphone load, however ornery, and whether normal or balanced. It also powers Stax ESLs – so Stax fans needn't buy an energiser. It's available in black/white, or all-black. *www.audiovalve.de*



Tim De Paravicini was showing a new CD player in the Acute range but he seemed far more excited about the tape deck seen at the right. It's a super-rare Denon DH-610S, a Japan-only item that falls in the pro/semi-pro category. The system consisted of EAR-Yoshino components entirely, heard via the BBC-ish Graham LS5/8s. *www.earyoshino.com*



Portugal – The Audio Show

Pro-Ject tempted with a tasty selection of some of its most popular turntables, plus the new RPM 1 Carbon (second from left). Costing £325, the deck features a new arm made from carbon fibre and aluminium resin. *www.henleydesigns.co.uk*

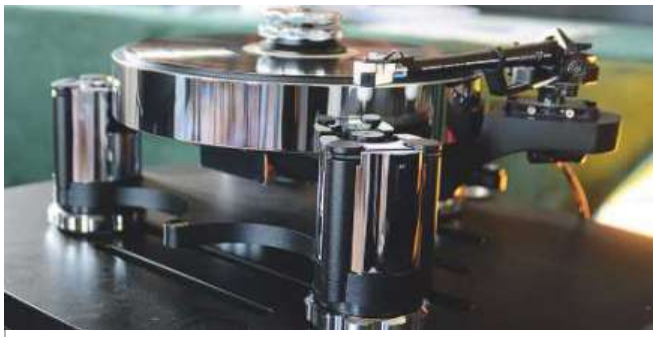


Once again, Wilson Audio was responsible for some of the most beautiful sounds at the show. A pair of the company's Sasha Series-2 loudspeakers [*HFN* Jul '14] was driven by a D'Agostino Momentum Integrated [p53] – weighing in at 54kg and said to deliver 200W/ch – fed by a CD8T CD player from French company Métronome Technologie. Power to the whole system was filtered through a Nordost Quantum Qx2 mains filter and distributor block. *www.absolutesounds.com; www.nordost.com*



These magnificent loudspeakers are the Coltrane Supreme IIs from Marten Audio. Despite being taller than most visitors and weighing 200kg a piece, they 'disappeared' as soon as the music played. Electronics were courtesy of VTL, its Siegfried II power amps also dominating the scene. The total system cost was nearly €700k with the Ultimo K2 turntable from Portuguese designer Rui Borges. *www.marten.se; www.ruiborgesturntables.com*





A beautiful shot of the polished-chrome Avid Acutus turntable, complete with three-point suspension, 10kg platter and dual-belt drive system. Seen here with SME V tonearm, the Acutus was illustrative of the analogue-only front-ends used by many exhibitors. *www.avidhifi.co.uk*



Electronics from Canor in the form of its TP106 VR integrated amplifier and CD2 VR+ CD player were partnered here with the Cambridge Audio 851D upsampling DAC/preamp and Tannoy's DC10 floorstanders. *www.canor-audio.com; www.tannoy.com*



What could be more fitting for Focal's flagship Stella Utopia EM loudspeaker than a magnificently decorated room with a beautiful view over Lisbon's Tagus river? Electronics were Naim through and through, with the company's NSX streamer as source feeding a NAP 500 power amplifier. *www.focal.com; www.naimaudio.com*

Japan – Tokyo Audio Show



Ayre's MX-R Twenty is a mono amp rated at 300W and has zero-feedback, fully-balanced discrete circuitry. It features the company's proprietary Ayre Double Diamond output stage, AyreLock power supply and Ayre Conditioner power line RFI filter. Size is 280x480x95mm (wdh). *www.ayre.com*



Esoteric's unapologetically high-end flagship Grandioso range was demo'd alternately through both Tannoys and a complete Avantgarde horn set-up with subs. The range consists of the two-chassis C1 line preamp, 300W M1 monoblocks and P1/D1 SACD/DAC combo. The latter, a dual-mono source, amounts to a four-chassis digital front-end. *www.esoteric.jp*



Two of Accuphase's new A-70 stereo power amps, seen at the front of this display, were set up to demonstrate Fostex G2000A and Magico Q3 loudspeakers. The A-70 is a Class A design, rated at 60W/ch and weighing in at 44.3kg. Also launched was the fully-loaded C-37 phono amp. *www.accuphase.co.jp*

Further evidence that cool DACs with headphone amps are the defining product of this age. Marantz's HD-DAC1 [*HFN* Apr '15], uses Current Feedback technologies from its Premium 11 Series. The HD-DAC1 can 'even drive audiophile high-impedance headphones of up to 600ohm'. *www.marantz.co.uk*



Our pic doesn't do justice to the sheer scale of the massive Triode Junone Reference M212 Monoblock. To give you some idea, the 212E output tubes are over a foot tall – dwarfing the 845 driver just behind. Meters are switchable from 10W to 100W maximum readings. *www.triode.co.jp*



Audio Alchemy, probably the first brand to offer killer budget digital hardware way back in 1990, was reprised in 2015. The all-new range consists of DDP-1 Digital Decoding Preamp, PS-1 Power Station outboard dual transformer linear PSU, DPA-1 150W/ch Class D Power Amp and MRD-1 Media Rendering Device high resolution file player. *www.audioalchemy.com*



Hong Kong – High-End/AV

The huge HK$195,000 (£16k) Legacy Aeris speaker from the US features a dual AMT (Air Motion Tweeter), 8in 'titanium-encrusted' Accordion Edge midrange plus 10in mid-bass and dual 12in subs. The bass section is powered by 1kW of ICEpower amplification and extends down to a claimed 18Hz. *www.legacyaudio.com*





Triangle Art or work of art? This superb turntable, the Signature, weighs a little shy of 90kg and includes a 48mm-thick composite platter to dampen any extraneous noise. The deck is fitted with a 12in ebony Osiris arm and Zeus MC cartridge for HK$423,000 (£35k). *www.triangleart.net*



Cambridge-based dCS showed off its latest DAC product, the HK$206,000 (£17k) Rossini, which replaces the Puccini range and promises a new performance standard. Tidal, Spotify and Deezer are all supported over Ethernet while USB, AES/EBU and S/PDIF cater for DSD and LPCM files from PC/legacy sources. *www.dcsltd.co.uk*

A departure for Sonus faber, the leather-bound bookshelf/standmount Chameleon B allows owners to change side panel colours to match their décor or mood. Great sounding and ostensibly great value, the Italian-designed and built two-way vented speaker features a 29mm fabric dome tweeter and a 150mm plastic-coned mid/bass unit. Sensitivity is rated at 87dB. *www.sonusfaber.com*





Given the strength of the Swiss Franc, one wonders how Swiss producers manage to export for profit. No such problem for Nagra, evidently, whose Seven, a portable two-channel recorder is really a 'Pro' front-end source with touch screen. The CDC disc player/DAC/pre may be connected directly to an amp. *www.nagraaudio.com*

It looked as if Devialet had pulled out all the stops with the arrival of its networked and ADH-powered Phantom speaker solution, as, for the first time ever at the HK show, the French had turned up in force. And with audiophiles able to choose the music playing through the pods outside the demo room, it certainly was turning heads. *www.devialet.com*



hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control and arm
Made by: European Audio Team, Prague
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, UK
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.euroaudioteam.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price (including arm): £2498

AUDIO FILE



EAT C-Sharp/C-Note

With the £2498 C-Sharp, EAT has created another high-mass design that looks very stylish indeed: a turntable of classic proportions and elegant design – in fact it's a scaled-down successor to the Forte S [*HFN* Dec '10] and E-Flat [*HFN* Jan '12] but fitted this time with a single motor.

Immaculately black-lacquered, the plinth is made of high-density MDF and is supported on three adjustable aluminium cones. Nestling within the rim of the plinth, the carbon-fibre-patterned top plate forms a suspended subchassis on which the main bearing and arm are mounted. It's actually a sandwich of carbon-fibre and MDF, supported on ten compliant elastomer cones.

The inverted main bearing has a 10mm-diameter shaft topped by a ceramic ball. Over this fits the substantial sub-platter, a machined aluminium disc 80mm in diameter and 15mm thick, complete with its matching bronze journal. The belt, a round section type, is said to be made from a special anti-static rubber, which is then glue-joined and polished.

The chunky two-part record clamp irons-out mild record warps while the platter's bonded-on polymer playing surface, measuring just under 300mm, allows records to be lifted off with ease. A separate speed controller takes low-voltage DC power from a plug-top PSU and synthesises the appropriate AC feeds for the two motor speeds.

Imposing if rather 'blingy', the new 10in C-Note arm fitted is said to 'combine all advantages of a unipivot arm with a Cardan design'. It doesn't wobble all over the place like a unipivot, but is easy and comfortable to handle; and there is almost no bearing play in the lateral plane. Some play in the vertical direction will not be critical, as the bearing will always be loaded by the mass of the arm.

The sleek-looking tapered carbon-fibre arm tube is completed by a polished aluminium headshell. Its geometry makes installing cartridges simple and EAT says that inside the arm tube a silicon-based grease damps tonearm/cartridge resonances 'by more then 50%'.

The counterweight shell is filled with a sorbothane-type material and an accessory disc can be added to balance out the heaviest MCs. Setting up the thread-and-weight bias adjustment is slightly fiddly but the C-Sharp is still a joy to install.

'A seemingly extra deep response from the EAT gave weight and gravitas'

WITH A LIVELY BOUNCE

Fitted with an Ortofon Cadenza Black the EAT gave a strong and commanding sound, with a fine, extended and very well-controlled bottom end, and detailed upper registers. However, we felt that a Benz Micro Glider SL was subjectively a better match, always sounding warm and open, so we ended up just wanting to listen to more and more music.

On music with a beat, the turntable had a lively bounce about it. Listening to funky guitarist Mel Brown and the neat little instrumental 'W-2 Withholding' from *Eighteen Pounds Of Unclean Chitlins And Other Greasy Blues Specialties* [Bluesway], Brown's trademark tricky blues picking seemed hugely energetic. Brass and organ sounds were light, bright and clean, while the unidentified bass player's great sound came over with immediacy and clarity.

The EAT seemed to be quite good at humanising a relatively processed recording too. On Stevie Winwood's *Arc Of A Diver* [Island], he overlaid all the instruments himself, to a point where his vocals often seem almost buried in the mix. Yet with the EAT they were always intelligible and impactful, so the songs made sense.

With *Last Dance* by Keith Jarrett and Charlie Haden [ECM], we were immediately captivated by Jarrett's spiky, instantly communicative piano on 'My Old Flame', while Haden's string bass had terrific energy and presence, with a seemingly extra deep response from the EAT giving weight and gravitas; his later bass solo burst out of the speakers with real passion.

ABOVE: While the C-Sharp shares the 2012 E-Flat model's heavyweight oversized platter, it carries an all-new 10in arm. A control unit with electronic switching is a separate item connected at the rear of the plinth. The C-Note arm's counterweight is damped by a sorbothane-like polymer, while the tube itself combines high rigidity with a moderate effective mass

VERDICT

EAT's unique advantage is its close association with Pro-Ject's manufacturing resources, and many of the design decisions and material choices seem to reflect the latter company's expertise. Yet this is still an eminently luxurious product and, if the looks grab you, the sound certainly won't disappoint.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.23rpm (–0.32%)
Time to audible stabilisation	9sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.03% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–69.8dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–68.9dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–56.8dB
Power Consumption	11W
Dimensions (WHD)	500x135x400mm

AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable system with manual speed control
Made by: Pro-Ject Audio Systems, Austria
Supplied by: Henley Designs Ltd, UK
Telephone: 01235 511166
Web: www.project-audio.com; www.henleydesigns.co.uk
Price: £599 (inc. arm and cartridge)

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT



Pro-Ject RPM 3 Carbon

Pro-Ject's £599 RPM 3 Carbon deck follows the original Genie aesthetic, eschewing a traditional rectangular plinth in favour of a boomerang-shaped chassis, which extends from under the platter to support the arm and motor.

It comes with a 10in tonearm and a newly designed Ortofon 2M Silver MM cartridge which upgrades the entry-level Red version with silver spools in its generator system.

Every aspect of this turntable feels solid, and our review sample's white finish looked top quality, emphasised by finely chamfered upper edges and countersunk bearing screws. This main chassis sits on three cupped conical feet, the rear two with rubber isolators.

'Rolling back the album's years, its production was still crisp and enticing'

The bearing itself is an inverted design – a 50mm polished stainless shaft with a ceramic ball at its tip, spinning inside a brass sleeve that's pressed into the platter's underside. The lower bearing shaft attaches to a 20mm-thick round steel plate, bolted to the deck's underside, serving to balance out the deck's weight distribution while keeping bearing noise low.

The RPM 3's 32mm-thick platter is made from machined MDF with a 5mm layer of recycled vinyl bonded to its upper surface. On the underside, numerous strategically drilled holes of varying depths around its outer edge help to balance it dynamically.

Pro-Ject's latest AC motor sits in a cut-out in the RPM 3's plinth, which aids correct positioning and belt tension. Alongside the pulleys for 33.3 and 45rpm the motor also features a top-mounted on/off switch with a red LED.

The new S-shaped tonearm has a bonded carbon fibre skin over an inner alloy tube, while its superbly finished joint-free headshell, finger-lift and main wand are fixed to a barrel-like bearing housing and arm-pillar which offer VTA and azimuth adjustments. A new type of magnetic anti-skate is operated by a finger-wheel and sliding scale neatly integrated into the arm pillar.

ABOVE: S-shaped carbon fibre tonearm boasts an alloy inner tube, magnetic anti-skate adjustment and a new Ortofon pick-up. The deck's gloss finish also comes in red or black. A vinyl topped MDF platter is dynamically balanced at the factory

A SENSE OF WARMTH

As soon as the deck's elliptical stylus hit the groove of Ron Sexsmith's 'Me Myself And Wine' [*Forever Endeavour* – WEA], the Pro-Ject illustrated perfectly why vinyl's appeal has endured. We were greeted with a well balanced blend of mature detail and plain fun. Sexsmith's vocals were nicely opened up to reveal their intentionally relaxed tones, while each shake of the tambourine was presented with a natural ring and decay. The horn sections within the track had a welcome sense of warmth around their edges, making it all the more accessible, while at the same time retaining enough focus for them to be equally well defined in the soundstage.

What also hit us early on were the impressively low levels of background noise. Cueing up a 1984 pressing of Foreigner's *Agent Provocateur* [Atlantic] that has seen plenty of action, we found ourselves hard pressed to tell this vintage edition from a new LP straight out of its shrink-wrap. And when the slow-building music kicked in from the standout power ballad 'I Want To Know What Love Is', the deck rolled back the album's years to show its production remaining just as crisp and enticing today.

The sustained echo of the synthesisers and percussion had real body in the midrange, showing that the RPM 3 package is well equipped to punch beyond what its physical form might suggest. What also came across was a real sense of cohesion, suggesting arm and cartridge were pulling together. No single sonic aspect stood out; instead you had a very even delivery of the music, making it all more involving and enjoyable.

VERDICT

The Pro-Ject RPM 3 Carbon faces stiff competition and yet has plenty to shout about, with its superb arm, bearing and MM pick-up. What really marks it out is its sheer 'completeness', delivering a sound that hugely exceeds the sum of its modest parts.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.32rpm (–0.03%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.03% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–68.5dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–71.6dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–64.4dB
Power Consumption	5W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	447x118x373mm / 5.5kg



Hugo Nielssen with the legendary Contour 1.8

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Dynaudio Contour – a magic name among audiophiles. And the living example of a true high-end loudspeaker. Consistently refined and further optimized since its launch in 1986 to this very day. Completely handmade in Denmark, the new Contour S 1.4 and S 3.4 Limited Edition models offer absolute refinement in design and finish, combined with a higher level of sound quality that is instantly audible. The legend continues. www.dynaudio.com/contour

All there is. DYNAUDIO

AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable, arm & MC cartridge
Made by: Rega Research Ltd, Essex
Supplied by: Rega Research Ltd
Telephone: 01702 333071
Web: www.rega.co.uk
Price (including arm): £3698



Rega RP10/ RB2000/Apheta 2

You can now have Rega's latest RP10 turntable with the superb RB2000 arm pre-fitted with the revised Apheta 2 cartridge. This moving-coil normally costs £998 but you can save £700 with the complete package reviewed here.

Rega has always believed that a turntable plinth needs to be as light and rigid as possible, and that rigidity is really needed between the turntable spindle and the arm. To this end, in the RP10 a double-braced skeletal plinth is made from a core of hard, very light closed-cell nitrogen-expanded polyolefin foam between two skins of phenolic resin.

The glossy black rectangular outer frame (which you need not use) is there to support the usual Rega hinged dustcover.

'McFarlane's bass was woody and full-bodied with a rock-like stability'

Although this chassis is the same as the RP8's [*HFN* May '14], the RP10 turntable comes with Rega's current top tonearm, the RB2000: which is a further refinement of the RB1000 [see *HFN* Jun '10] made possible by modern 3D CAD/CAM techniques. There's now a better blending of the curves in the shape, in order to improve the arm's resonant behaviour. And, says Rega, there has been an 'intelligent redistribution of mass', in order to reduce stresses and resonances.

To suit the low-mass chassis the RB2000 has a lighter assembly to house the vertical bearing. Its arm tube casting is highly polished, with no paint or coating, while the wiring is in one continuous run from cartridge tags to phono plugs.

The RP10 has a ceramic platter rather than glass, the thickness varying constantly from the point where it sits on the sub-platter right out to the inner edge of its flywheel-effect rim. It comes with a white 100% wool mat and, as usual with Rega, there is no provision for record clamping.

A sophisticated custom power supply is built around a high-stability crystal oscillator with a new DSP control system which can generate a 'near perfect' sinusoidal waveform to drive the motor. Factory-set adjustments are then made to the PSU to tune the motor for optimum performance. The turntable is boxed complete with its two belts in place, and the RB2000 arm set-up too is straightforward.

PACE AND VITALITY

Given a well-crafted modern studio recording, the RP10/Apheta 2 combination could demonstrate an almost magical combination of inner detail and timing.

ABOVE: A subtly revised ceramic platter is topped with an all-wool white mat, while the decoupled outer plinth frame also provides a base for Rega's hinged dustcover. The all-metal RB2000 tonearm includes a new, stronger and lighter housing for the vertical bearing and comes with a tungsten counterweight

Pure Pleasure's reissue of Eric Bibb's *Natural Light* was a great example. On 'Guru Man Blues' Bibb's fine rhythm section seemed to have things cranked up to a new level of precision and urgency, with a truly solid and stable bass matched by natural-sounding snare and cymbals.

With 'Champagne Habits' there was great natural ambience around Bibb's vocal while the acoustic guitar with its ringing high notes was tangible and totally convincing within the soundstage. Here the tonal balance was sweet and natural, and never over-bright.

Listening to Rega's own Christine Collister album, *Love*, we felt that the textures of her voice were presented so effortlessly that you could imagine yourself present at the recording session itself, while the bowed double-bass of Rory McFarlane was woody and full-bodied with a rock-like stability that made it very realistic.

The RP10/Apheta 2 seemed well equipped to deal with classical orchestral music too. With the original Apheta cartridge [*HFN* Aug '08], we had found that the 1967 Barenboim/ECO recording of Mozart's Piano Concerto K467 could benefit from the treble cut provided by the notch filter on the earlier Rega Ios phono stage. But this didn't apply with the Apheta 2 as, this time, the strings were vivid-sounding but not too edgy or overbright, and the EMI LP sounded fundamentally well balanced.

VERDICT

With this RP10 package, Rega is offering a clear advance on its earlier decks. The combo excels in Rega's strong suits of pace and vitality, ably assisted by the improved Apheta 2 cartridge.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.46rpm (+0.37%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.03% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–69.9dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–73.7dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–63.3dB
Power Consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD)	450x120x365mm

Ayre

Fresh Ayre



With the introduction of the AX-5, Ayre has taken a fresh approach and breathed new life into the Integrated amplifier.

Integrating a number of unique innovations together has allowed Ayre to create an elegant single-chassis design, without sacrificing functionality and Ayre's award-winning sound.

In the words of Charles Hansen (CEO & Head of R&D at Ayre):
'In the simplest view, the Ayre AX-5 is an amalgamation of the Ayre AX-7 and the Ayre KX-R. Yet in another way, the AX-5 is the most radical integrated amplifier ever designed.'

For the full story please go to www.symmetry-systems.co.uk.

symmetry

t: 01727 865488
e: info@symmetry-systems.co.uk
w: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control
Made by: SME Limited, Steyning
Supplied by: SME Ltd
Telephone: 01903 814321
Web: www.sme-audio.com
Price (with Model 309/Series V arm): £6884/£8398

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT



SME Model 15

Readers familiar with the SME range will recognise instantly that this new £5373 design is, in essence, the much-loved Model 10 'with a full suspension'. It increases the space requirements but is still a relatively compact turntable, and looks so, thanks to the absence of a rectangular base.

SME has realised that clients liked the compactness of the Model 10 but wanted the added benefits of a true suspended chassis, as in the Model 20/3 [*HFN* Mar '11]. How this was done is sublimely clever. SME added three 'circles' to the bottom plate, and fitted the towers with one near the arm, a second at 10 o'clock and the last front-and-centre. As a three-footed construct, it's easy to level, especially thanks to the adjustable feet, offering perfect fine-tuning as regards height, isolation and other parameters that the Model 10 achieves only with careful placement.

Its distinctive 4.6kg platter is machined from aluminium alloy and fully damped. Records rest on a top surface that is diamond-turned with a fine scroll not unlike an LP groove.

SME says 'this method of finishing upsets a myriad of tiny fibres which interface with the underside of the record', while a screw-down clamp 'provides the largest possible platter contact even when an appreciable record warp is present'.

Like all of its siblings, the Model 15 has an outboard control unit-cum-power supply that delivers fast start-up, impossibly quick braking of the platter and very fine speed adjustment in ±0.01% increments.

> 'We had no idea so much was going on in this seemingly simple tune'

AIR A'PLENTY

Lionel Hampton's *Newport Uproar!* [Pure Pleasure] was a wise choice for showing off the scale of the system. Fitted with Series V arm and a Kiseki Blue MC, the SME spread the sound across the room, with front-to-back depth suggestive of a massive proscenium, as was the stage at Newport.

For something wholly studio-born, we turned to Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms* [Mobile Fidelity] which also provided the opportunity to play with 45rpm. Despite its digital origins, this is an impressive-sounding LP, especially if you want to hear detail and attack. Although Dire Straits are, for some at least, a guitar-driven band, and the sounds are manipulated, the playing was staggering in its fluidity and speed. Never did the SME stumble.

Transparency is the order of the day, and those who have played *Brothers In Arms* to death, even in digital form, would hear teensy details that are often buried. Add to that the physical form of the deck, which is so utterly, genuinely 'open architecture' that changing cartridges or arms is freed of whole layers of hassle.

Another MoFi 45rpm release, Bob Dylan's *New Morning*, let us think less about the sound and more about the performance. What this LP produced, and what we certainly were not expecting, were lower registers of such command and mass that it was hard to reconcile with its alt-country-ish feel. 'If Not For You' had the atmosphere of a back porch sing-a-long, but with world-class musicians.

Most persuasive, though, even beyond the instruments, was Dylan's voice, a sound so distinctive that you'd recognise it over two tin cans and a piece of string. The rasp, the nasality: what was so chill-inducing was the intimacy – Dylan in your listening room. And behind him, a luscious mix of fluidity in the strings, contrasted with wheezy harmonica and percussion made to sound like orange crates. We had no idea so much was going on in this seemingly simple tune.

ABOVE: Isolation is much improved over SME's Model 10 thanks to its 'rubber band' suspension of the upper chassis, as per Models 20/3 and 30/2, as well as height-adjustable, springy feet. A socket for the PSU cable sits at the back of the lower baseplate

VERDICT

We did not expect the Model 15 to perform so astoundingly that we'd think of it in terms of, say, Wilson's Sabrina or the Koetsu Black… The world is awash with delightful turntables, but this is the world's best deck below £10k.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.32rpm (–0.03%)
Time to audible stabilisation	4sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.015% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–72.5dB (with clamp)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–74.9dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–59.2dB
Power Consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD)	452x175x361mm / 18.5kg

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control
Made by: Stella Inc., Tokyo, Japan
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.techdas.jp; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £28,898

AUDIO FILE



TechDAS Air Force Two

TechDAS has followed the ground-breaking Air Force One turntable [*HFN* Jun '13] with this 'scaled-down' version – albeit with a slightly wider footprint than the One's.

The One remains the prettier of the pair, but the Two possesses its own ultra-functional charm while offering all of the operational niceties of the One, including the illuminated display, pitch control in ±0.1% steps, and pretty much adjustable everything else.

The chassis is made of cast aluminium, with a textured grey paint finish, sitting on four pillars. There's a hybrid suspension system with a sealed upper air chamber and a more economical lower section: a 'macromolecular polymer' with a built-in spring, internally damped with oil in a sealed chamber. The Two retains the air bearing pump, suction pump, external motor power supply and condenser, just like its predecessor – but in one external box, not two.

The Two has one standard platter, made of solid aluminium and weighing 10kg. Two tonearms can be fitted: 9in or 10in in the conventional position, while across the back the user can fit either 9in, 10in or 12in arms, and TechDAS says it will supply boards to suit any arm you care to fit.

Although the TechDAS turntables seem to present daunting set-up regimes, a trained dealer can do this in about 30 minutes. Once set up, it maintains a stable state of tune with near-mythic consistency.

Across its front are the buttons for all functions, including Stop, 33.3 and 45rpm (left of the speed display), Pitch High, Pitch Low and Suction (to the right). Operationally, the joyous feeling is similar to that of the One. There is something absurdly satisfying about a vacuum system that actually works without drama, and does so with almost indecent haste.

> 'The noise floor was so low that one could mistake it as near-digital'

TWO VERSUS ONE

For the listening sessions, we used the EAT E-Go tonearm [*HFN* Apr '13] with Koetsu Blue Onyx MC cartridge, choosing the same discs we'd played through the Air Force One. With Rodriguez's *Cold Fact* [Blue Goose], from vocal textures to the resonances one associates with acoustic guitars, the entire album enjoyed the sense of 'presence' that had been conveyed by the One. Plenty of low-level detail and air ensured that one heard as realistic an acoustic guitar as could be obtained from vinyl. But it was a marginally 'smaller' image than can be extricated through the good graces of the Air Force One.

Turning then to the detailed, immaculately-produced masterpiece, Willy DeVille's *Miracle* [Polydor], provided just the ammunition for assessing the two turntables' way with attack, extension, dimensionality, *et al*. This is, of course, where 'Assassin Of Love' first appeared, and it proved to be one of DeVille's most anguished performances.

With either deck DeVille's voice materialised from an inky black silence, the noise floor so low that one could mistake that aspect of the performance as near-digital. Our impression was that the One bested the Two in this area, but not so you would think, 'Hmm, where can I find another £47k?'.

The coherence of the Air Force Two's playback will find favour with those who adore wide dynamic contrasts, the surprise element of 'attack', especially from, say, punchy horns. While not quite as sharp as the leading edges heard through the One, the etching is of such a high calibre that it can fail to impress only those who have the dearer deck to hand.

ABOVE: Its enamel finish and more utilitarian aesthetic distinguishes the Air Force Two from the One, but soft-touch speed control/adjustment and vacuum LP hold-down features are retained. The Two's machined 10kg alloy platter is lifted 0.03mm above a hard glass surface by a cushion of air

VERDICT

The Two is among the finest turntables you can buy. But the One remains the big brother in this family. Considering the huge price difference, though, it's a decision that will probably be made by your wallet rather than your ears.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.33rpm (+0.005%)
Time to audible stabilisation	18sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.01% / 0.02%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–73.0dB (with vacuum hold)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–74.0dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–64.3dB
Power Consumption (PSU + pump)	39W (4W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	685x160(+arm)x460mm / 47kg

AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable with electronic speed control
Made by: HiFiction AG, Switzerland
Supplied by: Fi Audio, Scotland
Telephone: 01563 574185
Web: www.tonarm.ch; www.fiaudio.co.uk
Price (including arm): £14,985-£15,645

hi-finews HIGHLY COMMENDED



Thales TTT-Compact

Micha Huber, owner and designer of all Thales products, is a man who had a background in the mechanical engineering of high-end watch brands before he turned his hand to vinyl replay. Rather like SME he started out by making top-flight tonearms, before expanding to include a range of equally unique partnering turntables.

The £8795 TTT-Compact is the more costly of Thales' two decks, graced with the high specification Simplicity II tonearm (£6190 as standard, or £6850 with 'direct' wiring, as per our review sample) and the deck's deceptively understated aesthetic hides some very sophisticated technologies.

Its elegant chassis is milled from a slab of low-stress black anodised aluminium. In this plinth sits the main bearing, which is a hand-polished chrome-plated carbon tool steel main shaft running against a hardened steel ball in two sintered bronze bushings.

Lift the 6.5kg alloy platter, with its proprietary 'high density surface', and you see its mass is concentrated around the outer edge – equalling the *effective* mass of an 8kg platter, says Thales. Its hollowed-out inner circumference hides a 150mm grooved sub-platter for the precision-ground circular rubber belt. Drive is by a (gold-plated!) brushless DC motor, isolated from the main chassis. Four rechargeable batteries in the base of the plinth supply power within a closed loop system to keep the motor speed constant, by comparing its feedback to a precise reference voltage.

The matching fully adjustable Simplicity II tonearm has two 'chopstick' style aluminium arm tubes, in a range of finishes, to reduce tracking error. Cartridge fitting is made convenient by a removable headshell plate, while, *in situ*, azimuth and VTA can also be fine-tuned on the fly, and the TTT-Compact is provided with a surprisingly heavy, non-threaded clamp with a rubbery underside.

> 'The Thales' sure-footed performance allowed us simply to enjoy the music'

NEVER FLUSTERED

Many high-end machines can create a sonic landscape that catches your attention, but with the Thales there's an added sense of *harmony* within the soundstage, suggesting that nothing is being compromised as it throws open a grand window onto the music.

Fleetwood Mac's 'Caroline' [*Tango In The Night* – Warner Bros] has plenty going on in the mix, and it can leave even the most measured decks a little flustered, but here there's no sense of it being overwhelmed by the track's complexity. As its dazzling intro of drums and vocals make way for the opening lead and bass guitar riffs, you can hear how each instrumentalist feeds off the other, each being granted their own air and space within the soundstage.

The Thales' sound isn't forward or too centrally focused, so no instruments or parts of the audio spectrum are shown obvious favour. Instead, you get a soundstage that's evenly formed, affording you greater access to *all* that's going on.

As it comes so close to the run-out groove, 'A Sailor's Life' on Fairport Convention's *Unhalfbricking* [Island], will cause many a turntable arm to 'cower', as the threat of the those low rumbling bass notes and Denny's majestic vocals lay down a challenge for pitch-perfect tracking. But with the Simplicity tonearm we were treated to a sure-footed performance, which allowed us simply to enjoy the music.

Via the Thales, the bass sounds lithe, well rounded and of a depth you perhaps wouldn't expect from such a tidy package. The lower notes on Daft Punk's 'Giorgio By Moroder' [*Random Access Memories* – Columbia] underpin the music with plenty of punch in the upper bass, seamlessly reinforced with lots of body in the lower registers. There's lots of bass *texture* too, which shows how this deck isn't just about moving lots of air to show off, when it can define each note and instrument in so lifelike a manner.

ABOVE: The Thales' three threaded feet with captive ball-bearing tips give firm support. Speed change is via plinth-top buttons for 33.3/45rpm with fine adjustment through two fascia holes, and there's a battery-driven, suspended DC motor

VERDICT

Few superdecks can equal the Thales for its Swiss-watch build quality, in such a stylish package. The jewel in its crown is of course the 'tangential' pivoting tonearm, which offers an exceptionally open and balanced sound.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.31rpm (–0.08%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.10% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–66.6dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–67.4dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–49.2dB
Power Consumption	1W
Dimensions (WHD)	435x100x313mm / 16kg


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www.gamutaudio.com

AUDIO FILE

Belt-driven turntable with manual speed control and unipivot arm
Made by: VPI Industries Inc., New Jersey, USA
Supplied by: Renaissance Audio, Scotland
Telephone: 0131 555 3922
Web: www.vpiindustries.com; www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk
Price (including arm): £3750

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED



VPI Prime/JMW 10 3D

Looking very much a modern VPI, the Prime continues in the Scout aesthetic of black and silver with an exposed plinth and freestanding motor. Rather than follow the predictable rectangular plinth approach, the Prime's 38mm-thick vinyl-wrapped MDF plinth is elegantly shaped with sumptuous curves that make it stand out from the crowd.

Its four isolating corner feet incorporate a flexible rubber nut sandwiched between solid Delrin plates. The lower one ends in a cone shape that locates into the centre of a puck-like base packing a trio of ball bearings fitted into its underside. Pressed into the Prime's plinth is an inverted bearing with a stainless steel shaft and chrome-hardened ball at its tip. This turns in a phosphor bronze bushing with a PEEK thrust disc in the platter.

'Plucked bass strings reach low enough to have a real physical presence'

The 9kg heft of the Prime's 48mm-thick machined aluminium platter is largely accounted for by a stainless steel damping plate bonded to its underside. You can also add a 'Periphery Ring Clamp' (£700) to hold your LPs flat.

The Prime comes equipped with a new 2mm-thick mat formed in an anti-static rubber, while the supplied threaded spindle clamp is also top quality, and gets a stainless steel upper section in place of the Scout's all Delrin version.

Drive is via a dedicated low-noise 500rpm Hurst motor housed in a solidly built cylindrical alloy case that carries a push button on/off switch and mains inlet socket. You can upgrade to VPI's £1500 SDS (Synchronous Drive System) at just £1250 if bought together.

Completing the package is the 10in JMW 10 3D armtube, the name referencing its 3D printed design. This arm offers adjustment of VTA on-the-fly and has clamping screws that can be secured by hand instead of with fiddly hex keys.

VPI recommends having it protruding around 6mm proud of the chassis when placing the motor within the deck's cutout. The peripheral belt fits to the upper pulley for 33.3rpm, or the lower one for 45rpm. Both pulley sections also allow limited fine speed tuning via extra grooves.

DIGGING DEEP

Using the revealing Goldring 2500 MM [*HFN* Mar '11], we started with 'The End Of The Affair' [*I Forget Where We Were* – Island] where Ben Howard's vocals sounded thickly textured via our Dynaudio Focus 260s, and we were treated to every subtle nuance as his singing style intentionally blurred each word into the next. The echo of plucked guitar during the opening section was noteworthy for how the Prime gave it real clarity, and for how the deck allowed its ringing echo to extend way back into the soundstage – more than we're used to.

With the title track from Laura Marling's *Once I Was An Eagle* [Virgin Records], from the soft shakes of the tambourine to the more pronounced strings and guitar work, the Prime served up each tone-colour with just the right amount of focus, without making them either overly pronounced or sidelined in the mix and all benefiting from the Prime's inky-black backgrounds.

Bass depth and impact were also notable Prime/JMW strengths, evidenced during the Laura Marling 'You Know' and 'Breathe' tracks, with the Prime letting the plucked bass strings reach low enough to give them physical presence, while ensuring they began and ended with real precision.

Switching to a Denon DL-103R MC revealed more of the deck's low-level capabilities. With Ásgeir Trausti's 'Hærra' from his 2014 album *Dýrð í dauðaþögn* [One Little Indian], it was the *quality* and detail of the lower notes that marked out the Prime's performance.

ABOVE: Freestanding AC motor drives the 9kg alloy/steel platter with a rubber belt around its periphery. Speed change is manual. The deck's curvy MDF chassis is steel-braced on its underside, and its 10in 3D printed tonearm offers easy adjustment

VERDICT

As a newcomer to VPI's stable, the Prime offers a whole lotta turntable for the money (its 10in arm alone costs £2k). Right down to its funky feet, it's clear that every aspect of this deck has been considered for maximum performance and ease of use in a package designed to make a style statement.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.21rpm (–0.37%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–68.1dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–70.6dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–55.1dB
Power Consumption	7W
Dimensions (WHD)	535x190x400mm

hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE

Photo-electric pick-up cartridge
Made by: Digital Stream Corporation, Kanagawa, Japan
Supplied by: Soundfowndations Ltd, Berks
Telephone: 0118 9814238
Web: www.ds-audio-w.biz; www.soundfowndations.co.uk
Price: £6250

AUDIO FILE

DS Audio DS-W1



An optical pick-up using an LED as a light source? No wonder DS Audio's DS-W1 costs £6250 – by today's standards, a median price for a loony tunes, boutique cartridge.

This price also includes its own dedicated phono amplifier, because it doesn't feed an MM or MC input. Indeed, you have to combine the DS-W1 pick-up with its own energiser/equaliser as the optical system needs a power source.

Once you've installed the cartridge, connected your turntable to the outboard box and fed its output into a preamplifier line input, switching it on activates a red light at the front edge of the cartridge. (We were instantly reminded of the Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica* as well as the cartridges from Soundsmith.)

The technology is based on the design of Toshiba's old C-100P cartridge, transformed by DS Audio into a more viable product by refining the concept with miniature laser-optic technologies not available 40 years ago. DS Audio CEO Tetsuaki Aoyagi believes 'this is the very best and most advantageous method to reproduce musical information on vinyl.'

The cartridge – lightshow aside – looks like any MM or MC, and it employs a boron cantilever and Shibata stylus. It is installed exactly as any other, so we had no trouble in fitting it to a SME Series V-12.

'The majesty of *Deep In The Night* simply shone through via the DS-W1'

The outboard PSU/eq box takes care of all settings – no worrying about impedance, capacitance, *etc* – and, besides the regular outputs, there's a pair with a subsonic filter, which cuts off below 25Hz at 12dB/octave, to cope with warped LPs.

The black box comes with pointy feet and cups to site it on a surface that's not spike-friendly.

DYNAMIC SWEEPS

Starting with Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms* [Mobile Fidelity] we immediately felt the DS-W1 had its own ideas about soundstage shape, detail retrieval, 'air' and tonal balance.

We were shocked at the incredible dynamic sweeps, the blackness of the background and the speed of transients. The bass, though, was more overwhelming than we'd expected: not fat however, not *too* rich, just pronounced in the manner of the modern listener's preferences.

The Dire Straits album sounded as rocking, fluid and involving via the DS-1W as through our normal Kiseki Blue and was coherent and consistent throughout.

But, aah, the bottom! With any system already balanced on a precipice of 'too much bass' the DS Audio could tip it over that point. We hooked up a pair of LS3/5As and, sure as shooting, the midband really is BBC-neutral, while the lack of lower octave activity from an LS3/5A ameliorated any bass issue.

With Lionel Hampton's *Newport Uproar!* [Pure Pleasure] we weren't expecting the DS-W1 to be as big-band-friendly as an MC, but here the Kardashian-esque lower registers supported the 20-piece orchestra with mass and scale appropriate to the performance. Everything sounded natural, as glorious in its analogue-ness as if we were hearing a Decca Maroon.

Turning to Bob Dylan's *New Morning* [Mobile Fidelity], the DS-W1 proved expert at dealing with its variety of unamplified instruments. There are certain albums, and this is one, that evoke a sense of 'woodiness', and we don't just mean the bodies of the guitars. We can almost smell cedar when we simply *think* of them. For all of its science-fiction-like high tech, the DS-W1 managed to sound as rustic as *New Morning* warrants.

But the killer moment? The piano salvo that starts 'Take It To The Limit' on Etta James's *Deep In The Night* [Pure Pleasure]. If ever piano playback lacked artifice, it is here. Via the DS Audio cartridge, the majesty shone through.

ABOVE: Inside the DS-W1 light from an LED shines on a photocell, which generates an electrical current that's modulated by the (rear) of the vibrating cantilever interrupting its path. A machined aluminium body and fully enclosed threaded lugs ensure the DS-W1 can be cranked tight into any standard headshell

VERDICT

With the DS-W1, it's as much about fascination with the technology as it is the merits of the actual performance. It is, by any measure, a superlative device, a serious contender in its price class, while the sound is enough of a departure from classic MC/MMs that you absolutely *must* hear it for yourself – it's like going from ribbon speakers to electrostatics.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Optical / 6.5g
Recommended tracking force	1.3-1.7mN (1.5mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	767mV / 0.40dB (from Eq unit)
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	15cu / 25cu
Vertical tracking angle	29 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	>80µm / >80µm
L/R Distortion (–8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.9–5.5% / 0.65–7.5%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+3.9 to –9.7dB / +3.8 to –9.5dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	33dB / 4dB

AUDIO FILE

Medium-output moving-coil cartridge
Made by: Ortofon A/S, Denmark
Supplied by: Henley Designs, Oxfordshire
Telephone: 01235 511166
Web: www.ortofon.com; www.henleydesigns.co.uk
Price: £325

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Ortofon Quintet Blue



ABOVE:
An aluminium cantilever and nude elliptical stylus are key features of the Ortofon Blue. Closely spaced pins means extra care is needed when connecting the tonearm wiring tags

There's long been a presumption that for a decent low-output MC cartridge able to give its MM rivals a run for their money you'll need to spend north of £500. Thankfully Ortofon doesn't subscribe to this thinking, as this new £325 Quintet Blue illustrates.

Ortofon's new Quintet range gets protective bodies made from a special thermoplastic material – acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) – chosen for its strong yet lightweight and anti-resonant properties. This ABS body acts as a shell for the pick-up's inner workings, which are fixed only to its aluminium mounting plate and back plate, but not to its outer body.

The Blue's nude elliptical stylus is a solid diamond bonded to an aluminium cantilever, while the internals pack lightweight coil wires made from pure 4-nines copper and powerful neodymium magnets. And because Ortofon has its own rubber making facilities, the Blue's suspension is designed entirely in-house, offering a compliance suitable for a wide range of arms.

A straight-sided body and threaded mounting holes make it easy to align, although its output pins need wider spacings, so extra care is needed to ensure none of your cartridge tags is touching.

Weighing in at 9g, the Blue is a good match for medium-mass tonearms, although it's a little taller than most cartridges (18mm), so it's worth checking that your tonearm's height can be adjusted should you need to raise it for optimal VTA.

Ortofon also includes a hard plastic stylus cover that slides over the cartridge body to provide plenty of protection during set-up.

A BALANCED ACT

Even if you're not able to see the Blue's innards, you're certainly presented with a window into its soul, thanks to its refreshingly open sound. And installed on a VPI Scout 1.1 turntable [*HFN* Oct '14] it seemed to relish the freedom afforded by the VPI's unipivot arm.

A few opening bars from Little Dragon's 'Paris' from *Nabuma Rubberband* [Because Music] let the Blue show how it can pull out plenty of detail with ease, allied to real dynamism. The synthesised percussion had ample depth and attack, and we could feel each notes' textures as they were served up by our Dynaudio Focus 260s.

Despite the soundstage being filled with multiple drum rhythms of varying pitch, the Blue's even delivery meant we could still enjoy the contrastingly slow, drawn-out vocals of lead singer Yukimi Nagano as they floated within the song's buoyant beats.

The opening riff to REM's 'Turn You Inside-Out' from *Green* always makes a grand entrance, and with a 'hot' sounding cartridge Peter Buck's lead guitar can sound a little too ripped open and shrill across the treble. With the Blue, the track's guitars were still given free rein to sound raw and edgy, but without being allowed to become 'spitty' at high SPLs.

> 'Guitars sounded raw and edgy but without any spittiness at high levels'

While the Blue took full advantage of the expansive soundstage afforded by the VPI deck, what was more striking was its talent for separating out instruments. Turning to Nick Drake's 'Fly' from *Bryter Layter* [Simply Vinyl] showed how well this cartridge coped with more challenging material. Each instrument was given plenty of air and space to let the notes form with convincing realism, which the Ortofon then knitted together into a cohesive whole.

Bass was also nicely articulate and evenly presented without being over-emphasised or lacking in tangibility. The 'Paris' track underlined how the Blue liked to show its hand in the lower registers, not just trying to impress with lots of low-down wallop, but by making sure the bass sounded natural and fully formed – neither overly dominant nor hollow, so low notes had genuine substance.

VERDICT

While there may be alternative pick-ups out there for similar cash that shine brighter with detail or strive for a grander presentation, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better alternative that's as well balanced across the board.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 9.0g
Recommended tracking force	2.0-2.5mN (2.3mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	620µV / 0.12dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	16cu / 16cu
Vertical tracking angle	26 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	80µm / 70µm
L/R Distortion (–8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.75–16.2% / 0.34–19.4%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.5 to –3.4dB / –0.25 to +1.35dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	33dB / 26dB



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AUDIO FILE

MM/MC phono preamp with balanced outputs
Made by: Parasound Products, Inc, California, USA
Supplied by: The Multi-Room Company, Glouc.
Telephone: 01242 511133
Web: www.parasound.com; www.multi-room.com
Price: £3300



Parasound Halo JC3+

From the moment the hi-fi world realised that separate phono stages could and usually did sound better than the phono boards built into pre and integrated amps, the market hasn't looked back.

One such was Parasound's JC3, a beautifully finished unit just as lovingly executed internally. Carefully compartmentalised and heavily shielded to reduce noise it also offered a choice between balanced and unbalanced inputs and a mono switch for the enjoyment of early vinyl pressings.

But some vinylistas thought its lack of variable cartridge loading was a serious omission. In truth, most users of modern pick-ups don't really need this facility, and designer John Curl had decided to omit it since it would add complexity which might compromise sonics.

Now though, the designer has decided that it *is* possible to offer improved flexibility without sullying the sound, and has come up with the Halo JC3+, pitched at £3300.

'It scythed through the mix like the proverbial knife through butter'

As well as adding independent load adjustment for moving-coil cartridges, the unit's dual mono phono module circuit boards have been improved, and the power supply has been uprated too, says the manufacturer.

The load varying potentiometers on the unit's rear panel are made by Vishay to Curl's specification, giving fine adjustment capability for each channel from 50-550ohm. Meanwhile the phono module PCB has been tweaked to further optimise the sound, and has 24kt gold-plated copper circuit traces.

In use, the new Parasound has the look and feel of a luxury product, although it is quite large compared to some designs. Its thick, curved alloy fascia has just a power switch, a mono switch and an illuminated logo, while at the rear you find both RCA phono and XLR inputs – and those load-adjusting potentiometers will obviously have real appeal.

FLAVOURSOME SOUND

Essentially, the JC3+ is an unerringly clean and crisp, modern-sounding design, yet one that remains fully able to communicate the alluring sound of vinyl replay.

With the title track from Joan Armatrading's *Me, Myself, I* [A&M Records] the phono stage showed its very low noise levels, making the opening solo vocals appear to come out of nowhere. It carried the opening drum strikes powerfully too, the reverberation audibly bouncing off all four corners of the studio booth in which the drum kit was recorded.

The Parasound can impart the inherent 'flavour' of a recording with consummate ease. For example, the lush early '70s soul strains of the title track from Isaac Hayes' *Shaft OST* [Stax] sounded dramatically warmer and more sugary than the quintessentially late '70s dry rock sound of Rush's 'The Spirit Of Radio' [*Permanent Waves* – Mercury]. There's no one type of music it thrives on, or is voiced for.

We were delighted by the ease with which the Parasound picked through the Rush track, since it's a compressed recording with close-miked vocals, a tight, heavily damped drum kit and lots of electric guitars running through multiple effects pedals. Yet the JC3+ scythed through the mix like the proverbial sharp knife through butter, hitting just the right balance between detail retrieval and the ability to communicate the innate musicality of the song.

And if it doesn't have the velvety patina of a tube phono stage (or indeed their associated slightly lazy, hazy demeanour) there is none of the tonal brittleness that some transistorised designs possess. It offers an admirably taut and controlled bass, which is strong but not overblown, a smooth and transparent midband completely devoid of the characteristic solid-state sheen than many competitors possess, and a delicate yet well-resolved treble.

It acted like an open window on the Donald Byrd track 'Lhasa's Dream' [from *Street Lady*, Blue Note Records], exposing the distinct sound of the studio with its rather rudimentary four-track analogue recorder, yet letting the music soar out and beguile the listener too. That's quite a trick!

ABOVE: The JC3+ comes in a choice of black or silver finishes. Its front panel confines itself to a power button and a mono switch for use with early LPs, while the finely finished rear panel offers unbalanced RCA phono or balanced XLR inputs, plus MC load adjustment potentiometers, MM/MC switching and a ground terminal

VERDICT

Parasound's Halo JC3+ phono stage indeed stands out: beautifully designed and built, it also boasts a good range of facilities. We've heard few better sounding designs at any price, and this makes it an exceptional product.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm / 50-550ohm
Input sensitivity (MM/MC, re. 0dBV)	3.04mV / 583µV
Input overload (MM/MC, re. 1% THD)	31.5mV / 6.1mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / **Impedance**	19.6V / 195ohm (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (MM/MC, re. 0dBV)	88.1dB / 71.5dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.2dB to –0.45dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.0017–0.012%
Power consumption	3W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	437x105x350mm / 8.6kg

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Network-enabled media player/storage/USB DAC
Made by: Astell&Kern, Seoul, Korea
Supplied by: Computers Unlimited, London
Telephone: 0208 200 8282
Web: www.astellnkern.com; www.unlimited.com
Price: £8999

AUDIO FILE



LEFT: The AK500N's top touchscreen is its control hub: side connections allow for 'phones plus USB and MicroSD storage. The only conventional controls are for volume and power

Astell&Kern AK500N

The AK500N is the first 'desktop' model from this Korean company, and is set to be joined later by a matching power amp and enhanced supply. But for now we have a unit combining the functions of network server/player, CD ripper, USB/MicroSD card player and DAC with asynchronous USB and Bluetooth – all in a striking, almost cubic package, just over 240mm tall.

There's a slot-loading CD transport for disc-ripping only, not playback, while the slightly offset sculpting reminds us more of 'stealth' technology than the Swiss Matterhorn said to have inspired it. The top flip-up 178mm WXGA touchscreen panel plays host to an extensive series of set-up and control options.

'There's a solidity to the bass that very few network devices match'

There's no conventional remote control handset, but iOS and Android control apps for smartphones and tablets are due next April. But it's possible to 'drive' at least the playback functions of the AK500N using third-party apps.

As a CD ripper, the A&K offers WAV or FLAC storage, and can handle content up to 384kHz/24-bit, as well as offering playback of DSD64 and DSD128 files. The AK500N has 1TB of SSD storage, upgradable to 4TB, and an internal battery that works for seven hours or so when the unit is disconnected from the mains.

The A&K provides fixed and variable-level RCA and balanced analogue outputs, AES/EBU, optical, coaxial and BNC digital inputs and outputs, USB-B and USB-A ports to the rear, and USB-A and MicroSD card slots on the side-panel. There's also a choice of balanced or conventional headphone output, using 2.5, 3.5 and 6.35mm sockets.

Each of the audio connections can be enabled or bypassed individually using the menu system. The latter may *seem* complex, but with a little familiarisation it's easy to get to grips with the set-up.

SOLIDITY AND SPEED

The AK500N impressed with a big-boned yet agile and finely detailed sound – we found it to be most impressive when playing from its internal storage or as a network player. Battery power removed a slight thickening of the sound when we opted for 'charge while playing', so our listening also majored with the power supply disconnected.

There's a solidity and speed to the bass that very few network devices, or CD players, can match, while the sense of soundstage focus shows just how well midband and treble information is handled.

The AK500N also copes very well with high-res files on USB storage, but sounds just a little softer when connected direct to a computer via a USB cable, and used in DAC mode.

With David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* in DSD [EMI], we were immediately impressed with the thump of the bass as the album opened, and the sheer impact of the acoustic guitar, sharply focused along with Bowie's voice, plus the way the sound maintained its integrity and clarity even when the tracks got rather rockier.

Similarly with ELP's *Brain Salad Surgery* [HDtracks], the A&K showed its stuff with real drive from the drums and guitar, allied to a wonderful bass snarl from Keith Emerson's bank of synths.

VERDICT

Unconventional in styling, the AK500N offers a sound with excellent slam and weight allied to very fine detail for sustained and serious musical involvement.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	2.97Vrms at 3ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB disc)	112.0dB / 112.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00019% / 0.00017%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0008% / 0.0032%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	–0.0dB to +0.0dB/+0.1dB/+0.4dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB disc)	275psec / <10psec
Resolution @ –100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	13W (9W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	214x243x238mm / 11.4kg

AUDIO FILE

USB DAC with DSD conversion
Made by: Ayre Acoustics Inc., Colorado, USA
Supplied by: Symmetry Systems, Herts
Telephone: 01727 865488
Web: www.ayre.com; www.symmetry-systems.co.uk
Price: £2495

hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE



Ayre QB-9 DSD

There are some definite oddities about the £2495 Ayre QB-9 DSD DAC: resolutely a one-trick pony it's an asynchronous USB converter and that's all. It has just a single USB Type B input plus RCA phono and XLR balanced analogue outputs, and a display to show the sample rate to which it's locked.

There's no remote control, no Bluetooth or AirPlay, not a sniff of a coaxial or optical digital input, or even a power switch… connect USB, mains and audio cables and the QB-9 DSD will simply wake up when the computer starts.

Styling is self-effacing although the compact casework is beautifully finished and feels good and solid.

'The Ayre laid down a tight, funky, groove with metronomic precision'

The one visible fascia feature is the display with blue numerals.

The QB-9 was first launched in April 2009 and subsequently upgraded to add 192kHz capability and 'single' (aka DSD64 or DSD2.8) DSD compatibility, as tested here.

Ayre promises that a DSD128 upgrade will follow in time and this will also add 352.8kHz and 384kHz PCM capability. A free upgrade will be offered to owners of the QB-9 DSD when that double option becomes available.

The Burr-Brown DSD1796 DAC of the original QB-9 has now been replaced with the ES9016S 'Sabre Ultra' 32-bit converter from ESS, and the audio master clocks upgraded. Changes were also made to the analogue audio circuitry, and the power supplies for the analogue and USB sections.

There are dip-switches to the rear of the product, and these cover: 1) digital filtering – 'Listen' to improve time-domain performance, or 'Measure' to tidy up the frequency-domain; 2) power mode – on when computer is on, or only on when an audio application is sending data; and 3) display on/off.

There's also a USB mode selector, allowing for standard or high-speed working – the 'Rsrv B' position is required for anything above 96kHz audio, and works fine with Mac OS X computers, while requiring an Ayre driver available as a free download for Windows.

INSTINCTIVELY RIGHT

We've never encountered a product with a presentation that seems so instinctively right from the get-go, while absolutely making the most of the system with which it's used.

What pours forth from this little box is a sound with striking bass weight and definition, allied to all the vibrancy and attention-grabbing detail one could want. And the Ayre does it with any music you throw at it, be it DSD, 'hi-res' PCM or CD rips, making even the most unlikely candidate come shining through.

It's a thrilling, addictive sound, and it gets better as you explore higher resolution musical formats. With Joe Stilgoe's witty *Songs On Film Live* at 48kHz/24-bit [Linn Records], recorded at the 2013 London Jazz festival, the Ayre just hit us with a great 'whoomph' of live ambience, and some of the most realistic piano, bass and drums we had heard for a very long time.

Similarly with Bowie's 'Fashion', from *Nothing Has Changed* [Parlophone], the Ayre laid down a tight, funky, wall-shaking groove with metronomic precision, driving the track on relentlessly.

Does the QB-9 DSD sound even better when playing 24-bit or high sample rate PCM or DSD files? Yes. It plays both kinds of files splendidly, with greater clarity, dynamic range and presence; and even doing some direct comparisons between DSD files and downsamples to PCM revealed little to tell between DSD64 and 176.4kHz/24-bit PCM. Some recordings sounded better in their DSD form, with better vitality and dynamics, while others had just an edge of sparkle in 'hi-res' PCM.

Both showed clear benefits in detail and dynamic range over CD quality files, superbly though the Ayre does play 44.1kHz/16-bit.

ABOVE: The Ayre QB-9 front panel contains no controls, and the display simply lights up when a signal is locked to show the sample rate. At the rear, the DAC offers a USB-B input only, alongside single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) analogue outs and AyreLink ports

VERDICT

The QB-9 DSD DAC excels with one-bit music and high-resolution PCM alike. Even more striking is just how good it can make CD-quality files sound, with a rich, solid and taut bass combining with treble and midband clarity for an involving and satisfying presentation.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	3.92Vrms at 61ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio	110.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0065% / 0.0012%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0037% / 0.0032%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to –2.4dB/–5.9dB/–10.2dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz)	145psec / 150psec
Resolution @ –100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	12W (standby 11W)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	215x75x290mm / 2.3kg

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AUDIO FILE

Network-enabled media player/USB DAC
Made by: Cambridge Audio Ltd, PRC
Supplied by: Audio Partnership PLC, London
Telephone: 0207 551 5413
Web: www.cambridgeaudio.com
Price: £1200



Cambridge Audio Azur 851N

Cambridge Audio has been involved in digital audio as long as almost any manufacturer, its CD1 CD player dating back to 1984. Latterly it has also brought affordable streaming/network audio products to the market, with the £1200 Azur 851N its most ambitious music player to date.

Although described by the company as a network audio player, it's also a DAC, complete with USB and S/PDIF digital inputs, and a preamplifier. As well as wired Ethernet connectivity and built-in Wi-Fi (with a USB antenna provided), it supports Apple AirPlay and can also accept an optional BT100 Bluetooth 'dongle'.

Digital inputs are provided on two RCA phono coaxial sockets, one AES/EBU input and two optical, the former supporting file formats up to 192kHz/24-bit, as does the Ethernet/Wi-Fi streaming capability, while the asynchronous USB 2.0 Type-B connection also allows DSD64 files to be played from a connected computer.

'Piano sounded deliciously full-bodied while the brass had a beautiful blare'

The three USB Type-A sockets to the rear can be used for the connection of storage media, with one also being enabled for the charging of connected smartphones, and there's a further USB on the front panel. Add Internet radio and Spotify Connect, and you have a pretty comprehensive digital front-end for any system.

Thanks to a large, clear display it's possible to operate the 851N either from its front panel or across the room via remote. But for the smoothest experience it's better to use an Android or iOS tablet or smartphone running the Cambridge Audio Connect app.

The 851N draws on a digital design already familiar from the flagship range's 851C CD player and 851D DAC/preamp. Its 'Adaptive Time Filtering' provides flexible upconversion to 384kHz/24-bit and there's a choice of digital filter settings too – there's no 'right' setting, but rather only the one best suited to source, system and personal taste. Running the show is a 32-bit SHARC processor, designed to maintain full digital resolution even as the volume is reduced, by resampling at every level-step.

A WIDE OPEN SOUND

Starting off with some classic prog in the form of Rick Wakeman's *The Six Wives Of Henry VIII*, in a 96kHz/24-bit rip from vinyl [A&M], what was immediately apparent was the low-end clarity of which the 851N is capable. Add to this an ability to drive even complex rhythms and present a stinging, but never tortured view of cymbals, plus those characteristically 'period' synth sounds – these were revealed in all their edginess.

This view was reinforced with Kyle Eastwood's *Timepieces* [Jazz Village] which makes clear the bass extension and definition on offer with the 851N, as Eastwood and drummer Ernesto Simpson bounce off each other, while above, the piano of Andrew McCormack sounds deliciously full-bodied and the brass of Quentin Collins and Brandon Allen has beautiful blare.

Switch to 'Pyongyang', from Blur's comeback album *The Magic Whip* [Parlophone], and again there's that sense of the music breaking free from the speakers and filling the room. The sound is instantly attractive, and yet rewards close attention with the information it contains about the tonality of voices and instruments.

Unsurprisingly, this sonic ability means the Cambridge Audio also makes a fine fist of classical music, and we greatly enjoyed Britten's *Young Person's Guide To The Orchestra* in DSD64 [Reference Recordings]. Every instrumental timbre was crystal-clear, even in the relentlessly building final fugue. Hugely exciting listening!

ABOVE: The 851N comes in black or silver; its big, clear display provides track/album/artist info and album/station artwork. A main rotary control offers turn-to-scroll/press-to-enter operation for simple 'hands on' navigation

VERDICT

Combining solid build with flexible, intuitive operation and a glorious sound, this is a fine addition to the flagship Azur range. Either as a source or keystone of a complete system, the 851N offers excellent value for money.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.27Vrms at 45ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB / Net.)	112.2dB / 111.3dB / 112.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00020% / 0.00022%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00024% / 0.00045%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to +0.08dB/–1.4dB/–3.3dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB / Network)	50psec / 55psec / 385psec
Resolution @ –100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	22W (<1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	430x115x360mm / 8.1kg

MOON

by SIMAUDIO

The Neo 230HAD is a headphone amplifier, a DAC and a line-stage preamplifier all housed in one very stylish package. The possibilities are endless and it can be used with virtually any digital source, offering the same fidelity as your main music system. The 230HAD fills an immense void in the current headphone marketplace, with an exceptional price to performance ratio.



0131 555 3922
renaissanceaudio.co.uk

RENAISSANCE AUDIO

AUDIO FILE

Network-enabled media storage device
Made by: Buffalo Technology, Japan
Supplied by: Kog Audio Ltd, UK
Telephone: 024 7722 0650
Web: melco-audio.com; www.kogaudio.com
Price: £1599

hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE



Melco N1A

Melco's £1600 'entry level' N1A music storage solution brings over much of the thinking behind the N1Z [*HFN* Feb '15], albeit with a simplified PSU and casework – nonetheless still sturdy and impeccably finished – and with the advantage of an expanded 4TB of hard drive storage.

Rather than feeding a network music player via a conventional network and switch/router arrangement, the Melco N1A is designed to sit downstream of your router just before the network player. And it has a direct Ethernet output to feed that player, plus a loop-through Ethernet input to allow Internet connectivity, and thus the likes of streaming radio and other online services.

It also has a USB socket to which a suitable DAC can be connected directly for music playback. This means that you could actually use the N1A to 'push' files into an outboard DAC and amplifier (For more on this see PM's Opinion, *HFN* Aug '15, p103: with the Devialet Le 800 monoblocks he thought the results were 'blissful… with minuscule details revealed from vanishingly quiet backgrounds'.)

'The revelation here was what the N1A can do as a USB source into a DAC'

However, with this direct route you'll still need a connection to a Wi-Fi router – so you can use a tablet or smartphone on the same network to 'drive' the Melco via third party UPnP control point apps including Audionet Music Manager, Kinsky or Lightning DS.

In addition to playing music stored on the N1A itself, this Melco+DAC set-up will also play other music in shared folders on the same network, with whichever app you choose. Pre-installed media server software is the DSD-compatible Twonky Media Server 7.

The Melco, which uses a single switch mode supply, has rapid power-up and shutdown from a front panel button, and protection against accidental power-off.

No computer is needed to set the N1A up, and content can be copied to and from it using the USB ports to the rear, one of which is dedicated to expanding the amount of storage with the addition of an external USB drive.

FOCUSED AND CLEAN

If you're going to use this server straight into a DAC then it's definitely an effective, if still rather expensive, improvement over a direct computer connection, but for us this jury is still out on how sensible a buy the N1A would be for use with a network player.

The differences we could discern between our well-sorted networking solution and the optimised Melco way were not really compelling, although things slotted into place when the USB output of the N1A was used directly into a DAC.

However, with the Melco directly connected to a Naim NDS network player, the bass was firm with good rhythmic definition, while the spaciousness of recordings made in churches and concert-halls was revealed. Even with a release such as Blur's *The Magic Whip* [Parlophone] in good old CD resolution, the dense layering of the recording opened up and revealed its strands effectively. And with a high-quality DSD release, the San Francisco Symphony's Mahler Symphony No 5 [SFS Media], the *Scherzo* had sparkle and vivid instrumental textures – especially in the brass – when things were done the Melco way.

However, the real revelation here was what the N1A can do when used as a source straight into a DAC connected to its USB output. With a Marantz HD-DAC1 headphone amp [*HFN* Apr '15], the direct connection from Melco to DAC provided noticeably more focus and an overall sense of a cleaner sound when compared to using the DAC with our MacBook Air. The effect was especially striking with the MacBook running on mains power, and slightly less so when left running on its battery power.

ABOVE: The OLED panel and navigation buttons allow the Melco to be set up and customised: the display can be switched off, and power on/off executes quickly. The front port is USB 2.0 with USB 3.0 at the rear

VERDICT

The N1A's advantage is very dependent on the quality of your home network – if this is constantly battered by numerous connected devices then the Melco will prove an audiophile godsend. Similarly, used as a USB source in place of PC or Mac, the N1A typically offers a palpably superior sound.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

A-wtd S/N Ratio (Chord Hugo)	105.0psec (91.5psec via PC/USB)
A-wtd S/N Ratio (Oppo HA-2)	106.9psec (96.6psec via PC/USB)
Digital jitter (Chord Hugo)	7psec (18psec via PC/USB)
Digital jitter (Oppo HA-2)	60psec (97psec via PC/USB)
Power consumption	17W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	436x70x352 mm / 7kg


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AUDIO FILE

DSD-compatible USB DAC
Made by: Métronome Technologie, France
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.metronome-technologie.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £15,900



Métronome Technologie C8+

Are we *really* still considering DACs with five-figure price tags, in an era when a £99 USB DAC sounds so good? Apparently so: France's Métronome Technologie addresses this cost-no-object sector with multiple converters, lavish multi-chassis construction and other expensive solutions.

For the C8+, which comes in below the company's Nausicaa DAC [*HFN* Dec '13], £15,900 pays for two options over its less-expensive C5 and C6 siblings. Most obvious is the addition of the Elektra outboard power supply, the two chassis connecting through a 4-pin umbilical – isolating power supplies from audio circuitry being inarguably wholly beneficial.

> 'Distinct layers of sound extended way beyond the back of the room'

The C8+ has one other trick up its sleeve to differentiate it from the C5/C6, while support for higher sampling rates adds the '+' suffix. (Although the C8+ currently resamples to 96kHz/24-bit, it does still handle source material up to 384kHz/32-bit.) It allows the user to switch between solid-state or valve output stages and, as much as we favoured the valves overall, the performance proved very much programme-dependent.

As with every product we've seen from Métronome, the construction is superlative, the components of the highest order. Unusually this two-box player is minimalist to a degree that's almost, well, circa-1977 British. A total of four toggle switches on the two faceplates handle all your choices, while the back hosts four digital sources (AES/EBU, Toslink, coaxial and USB) and a choice between balanced XLR or single-ended RCA phono outputs.

DAZZLING!

The Métronome pairing proved to be dazzlingly convincing, in the manner of good analogue. It's a thoroughbred sound, make no mistake. On the Stevie Wonder tribute, *Conception* [Motown], Eric Clapton's 'Higher Ground' opens with a whucka-whucka guitar pitched somewhere in between 1970s funk *à la* Wonder's original and early Jeff Beck, demanding the kind of fluidity that many refuse to attribute to a digital source. Via the Gallic player, a liquidity complemented its sonic antithesis: ultra-crisp percussion with aggressive 'thwack' and a dependence on transient attack for it to have all the necessary impact.

ABOVE: Controls are utterly minimalist: on/off and ground (earthing) lift on the power supply, and source select and solid-state or tube output on the DAC. The display shows just what is necessary

The two coalesced into a rich whole, but one that allowed the listener to appreciate the individual talents of the sort of band Clapton often assembles, including the late Billy Preston and Macca's regular drummer Abe Laboriel Jr.

The next track, 'Superstition', which Beck would record many times, is a perfect impression of Wonder's version by Glenn Lewis, again exhibiting attack to test one's woofers, with brass way in the background. The Métronome presented distinct layers of sound, extending all the way to the back of the room and beyond.

We then dug out 1950s tracks by The Cardinals [Collectibles]. With mono, and everything dead centre, it's easier to focus on the sound rather than the effects. The unaccompanied opening bar of 'Shouldn't I Know', immediately joined by the massed voices of the group, with a lone guitar and discreet percussion for the backing, oozes with a silkiness that a digital source could massacre. Not so with the Métronome. It was one big caress, a musical shawl embracing the listener that was also manifested by 'The Door Is Still Open', where the sound via C8+ was just gorgeous.

VERDICT

One has to ask: who spends this much on 'digitalia'? There's a big 'however', though. The sound, especially via the valve output, is so 'analogue' that we can see how the well-heeled will say, *this* is how digital should sound.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Max. output level /Imp. (Balanced)	5.07Vrms / 20ohm (1.3kohm tube)
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	114.1dB / 114.0dB / 100.4dB (tube)
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0022% / 0.0008%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.018% / 0.0007%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz)	+0.0 to –1.5dB/–5.4dB (–4.1dB tube)
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz / USB)	500psec / 310psec / 535psec
Resolution @ –100dB (S/PDIF / USB)	±0.2dB / ±0.1dB / ±0.6dB (tube)
Power consumption	31W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	450x105x435mm / 18kg (total)

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AUDIO FILE

Network media player/preamp/DAC
Made by: Naim Audio Ltd, Salisbury
Supplied by: Naim Audio Ltd
Telephone: 01722 426600
Web: www.naimaudio.com
Price: £3300 (£3595 with DAB+/FM option)

hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE



Naim NAC-N 272

When it comes to network audio playback, Naim seems determined to fit that old TV ad line 'Yes, madam, we have all the colours in all the sizes'. You can have your streaming in combined ripping/storage devices, in all-in-one systems from the Uniti range, as separates players in the ND range, and even as network-capable preamplifiers. This last group now has its second member, the NAC-N 272, at £3300 or £3595 with optional DAB/DAB+/FM radio tuner module.

It's the first Naim network product able to handle DSD files. Admittedly these have had little impact on the consciousness of the general music buyer, but they have gained a following among a sector of the high-end audio community, while DSD is now increasingly supported by streaming server packages such as MinimServer and TwonkyMedia.

This means that it's possible to stream this content, as well as high-resolution PCM, from a computer or NAS over a home network, to devices such as the NAC-N 272.

> 'The new Naim player allows the subtlest information to be heard'

The NAC-N 272 will handle DSD64/2.8MHz files (both DFF and DSF), but not the DSD128/5.6MHz or even DSD256/11.2MHz offerings now available from some of the DSD enthusiast music vendors.

Other new features here include the Spotify Connect compatibility recently rolled out to other Naim network products, and aptX Bluetooth. Separate antennae are provided for Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, along with an Ethernet port for wired networking. There's also a front-panel USB Type A socket which is iOS compatible and usable to play music from USB storage devices.

The familiar Internet radio functionality is provided by the vTuner platform, with Naim's usual customisation to provide a choice line-up of stations [though see our May '15 Investigation for more].

The NAC-N 272 also provides three coaxial and three optical digital inputs, which are 192kHz/24-bit capable. There are also two sets of analogue inputs, on both RCA sockets and Naim's preferred DIN connectors, and it's possible to adjust the input trim on each of these. The same choice of RCA or DIN sockets is offered for line- and preamp-level output, but there are no XLR analogue outs. The NAC-N 272 can also be upgraded with one of Naim's external power supplies.

Naim's Statement amplifier [p69] informs the design of the volume control, which uses an analogue resistor ladder under digital control, while a Class A headphone amp is also included. In other words, the NAC-N 272 is an analogue preamplifier with a range of digital input options onboard, rather than taking the easier, but less desirable, all-digital path.

A NAIM SOUND?

Sound quality can be summed up as 'it sounds very Naim': it's a sound combining plentiful detail and rhythmic drive with subtlety and refinement, plus a clean, tightly controlled but well-extended bass. Even better, it sounds the same whether you use the USB, S/PDIF or network streaming inputs and it also does well using Bluetooth.

Jeff Wayne's *War Of The Worlds* in DSD64 [Columbia] came up fresh, thanks to the added dynamics and impact the format can bring, and fairly powered out of the speakers. Similarly, the DSD release of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* [Analogue Productions] was full of details one might overlook on the CD version, and gained from the way the Naim allows the subtlest information to be heard. But it could also deliver all the slam of a track when required.

It's hard to argue with what the NAC-N 272 does and the value for money it offers to the Naim owner wanting to upgrade their system to network capability without increasing their box-count – not to mention its ability to create a complete streaming/amplification system when used with, say, a NAP 200 or the NAP 250.

To our ears, the NAC-N 272 is a much more convincing package than the NAC-N 172 XS, with little sign of compromise even when used via its analogue inputs, and real star quality when working digitally. But an asynchronous USB input would certainly have helped.

ABOVE: Front panel layout is familiar Naim stuff: volume control, USB-A in and headphone output to the left, display and control buttons to the right. Rear phono (RCA) connections and DIN sockets are included for analogue input and output. Naim also offers six digital inputs, a wired Ethernet connection and three antenna inputs

VERDICT

The Naim NAC-N 272 has wide-ranging input flexibility, and sounds equally good across all its digital connections, from streaming to USB stick playback, and whether with CD-quality rips or downloads, or high-resolution content.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (preamp)	8.9Vrms at 0.9-70ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (Pre / S/PDIF / Net.)	97.4dB / 107.7dB / 107.6dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.002% / 0.003%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.03% / 0.0012%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-30kHz, preamp/DAC)	+0.0dB to –1.5dB/–12.5dB
Digital jitter (48kHz / 96kHz)	35psec / 40psec
Resolution @ –100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	20W (<1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	432x87x314mm / 12.5kg

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

CD/SACD player, USB & S/PDIF DAC
Made by: T+A elektroakustik GmbH & Co. KG, Germany
Supplied by: Kog Audio Ltd, UK
Telephone: 024 7722 0650
Web: www.taelektroakustik.de; www.kogaudio.com
Price: £11,200

AUDIO FILE



T+A PDP 3000 HV

T+A's newest 'HV' source component, the £11,200 PDP 3000 HV, is designed to tick all the boxes required by today's most demanding audiophiles. It's the company's latest 'statement' D-to-A converter, which supports asynchronous data transfer of PCM up to 384kHz/32-bit and DSD64/DSD128. Moreover with a supplied ASIO driver, PC users running Windows can also play back DSD256 and even DSD512.

T+A has built in an SACD rather than simply a CD drive – a top-loader incorporating an anti-resonance puck which you place on top of the disc – while there are six additional digital inputs: one AES/EBU (XLR) and five S/PDIF (two Toslink, one RCA, two BNC).

'The bass served up by the organ's largest pipes was utterly seismic'

The construction of the PDP 3000 HV is nothing short of superb, built around a pure aluminium chassis and boasting complete symmetry and channel separation throughout. Substantial twin power supplies feed the PDP's analogue and digital sections separately, and you find *two* IEC connectors on the rear panel for its individual AC inlets.

To reinforce the company's no-compromise design approach, DSD data fed into the PDP 3000 HV's USB input from a computer source is handled entirely separately from PCM data. The PDP's DAC section is largely identical to that featured in the company's MP 3000 HV media player [*HFN* June '13] and four digital filter options can be selected via remote control. You can have endless fun experimenting with the PDP 3000 HV's different settings!

As befits a high-end source with a price tag exceeding £10k, both balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) analogue outputs are provided on the rear panel.

HOLOGRAPHIC SOUND

The PDP's sound quality, with CD or pushing data into its USB input, just sounds 'right'. There's no dramatic colouring or augmentation to musical events, rather it sounds 'pristine' and squeaky-clean. Familiar high resolution downloads of audiophile-quality recordings, for example from 2L and Channel Classics, sounded as holographic and breathtakingly realistic as we've experienced, the sound so obviously unsullied that we found it near impossible to determine any 'character' from the unit itself.

With Channel Classics' beautiful recording of Haydn's String Quartet in D-minor with the Dutch Ragazze Quartet (which we described as bold and richly-coloured when played via the USB input of T+A's MP 3000 HV media player) we were transfixed by the manner in which it portrayed the players' instruments with such vivid three-dimensional body and precise image focus. And especially when playing the native file with the PDP's playback mode set to 'DSD 4' and 'True DSD for DSD64' enabled.

Meanwhile the 1976-vintage analogue recording of 'Julsång' from the Proprius label's *Cantate Domino* [88.2kHz/24-bit, HDtracks] similarly appeared exquisitely 'open' and unvarnished. The massed voices in the chorus remained clear and unforced even during the loudest climaxes, and the powerful bass served up by the organ's largest pipes was utterly seismic.

As well as listening to the PDP 3000 HV via our Mark Levinson No383 integrated amp, we also auditioned it with T+A's flagship 'HV' pre/power combo, complete with additional PS 3000 HV power supply bolstering the A 3000 HV's power stages [*HFN* Sept '14]. What was clearly apparent, even when listening to run-of-the-mill CD-resolution recordings, was that the player/DAC's unadorned dead-pan delivery is precisely what the amplifier components require to give of their very best.

ABOVE: A rotary source selector and menu/media navigation controls flank the unit's large VFD which incorporates touch-sensitive controls for standby on/off and disc drawer open/close. The rear panel has seven digital inputs plus there's an S/PDIF output and separate analogue outs for the DSD and PCM sections

VERDICT

Given the PDP's top-notch sound, plus the fact you're getting three high-end components (SACD/CD disc transport, DSD and PCM DAC) for less than many standalone DACs, this new T+A is unquestionably an audiophile bargain.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.60Vrms at 44-50ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio (SACD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	114.9dB/114.1dB/114.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0008% / 0.00045%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00085% / 0.015%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to –0.37/–0.5/–7.2dB
Digital jitter (SACD / S/PDIF in / USB in)	33psec / 10psec / 12psec
Resolution @ –100dB (SACD / S/PDIF input)	±0.1dB / ±0.2dB
Power consumption (Digital/Analogue)	10W / 15W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	460x170x460mm / 26kg

AUDIO FILE

Passive USB conditioner/RF filter
Made by: AudioQuest, California
Supplied by: AudioQuest UK
Telephone: 01249 848 873
Web: www.audioquest.com
Price: £39



AudioQuest JitterBug

After the success of the DragonFly v1.2 USB DAC [*HFN* Mar '14] AudioQuest has a new 'widget' already commanding worldwide attention from budget-conscious audio enthusiasts playing music from their computers: the £39 JitterBug.

It's another USB (Type A) dongle, this time with a Type A socket at the other end. You simply plug the JitterBug into a USB socket on your laptop (say), and perhaps a DragonFly DAC into the JitterBug's socket. However, AudioQuest says it's not designed just for DragonFly owners, rather that the JitterBug will improve the performance of *any* USB-connected DAC.

'We almost fell off the sofa hearing how it could improve clarity and focus'

In fact the company goes further than this, claiming it's an essential 'tweak' to benefit pretty much all computer audio set-ups.

So what exactly is it? While its name might imply that it re-clocks the audio stream to lower jitter, it's a purely passive device designed to filter out 'nasties' by reducing the amount of electrical noise generated by the source (*ie*, the computer) travelling along a USB cable. It's a line conditioner for the 5V DC USB voltage bus (VBUS), and a signal filter for the USB data line.

AudioQuest says 'it also attenuates the entire signal to remove parasitic resonances, while also reducing – or in some cases completely eliminating – packet errors within the data stream.'

Computer audiophiles will be well aware of specialist firms offering dual lead USB cables which separate power from data. But you won't find one for £39! Anyway the JitterBug approaches the fraught issue of a computer's inherently hostile environment from a different angle: by attempting to reduce noise generated by the USB bus at its source.

If you simply push data from a computer to a USB DAC, AudioQuest suggests further improvement should be noticeable when using a second JitterBug in parallel (not series) on the same USB bus.

A QUIET NIGHT IN

Everybody's mileage is going to vary, since some DACs use the incoming USB's 5V DC power while many do not. If we'd hoped it might improve the performance of the little DragonFly v1.2, we certainly weren't disappointed. In fact we were completely blown away – there's no other way to say it. The sound was subjectively so much tidier and better focused that we feared we were losing our faculties… However, PM's lab tests [*HFN* Oct '15] confirmed both noise and jitter were clearly further improved with the JitterBug *in situ*.

We almost fell off the sofa when hearing how the JitterBug improved the clarity and focus of John Martyn's soulful reworking of Portishead's 'Glory Box' from *The Church With One Bell* [Independiente]. Where his voice had sounded smeared, hazy and lazy now the vocals popped into focus, occupying a distinct space in the soundstage, with enhanced clarity and diction. Playing Shelby Lynne's lovely analogue recording, *Just A Little Lovin'* [Lost Highway], also demonstrated the AudioQuest JitterBug's efficacy.

So much for hearing it transform the sound of a laptop PC and DragonFly v1.2 rig hooked up to Levinson No383 and Townshend Galahad speakers… what really floored us was observing how it also improved the performance of a second set-up of Mac mini and T+A DAC 8 [*HFN* Oct '12].

Time and again we found it made music sound more natural, more believable. But where the JitterBug really scored was in the manner in which it appeared to clean up less than stellar recordings, seemingly removing any fatiguing 'sizzle' or hash.

Thus when revisiting some classic Holland-Dozier-Holland songs from 1968, the title track from Diana Ross & The Supremes' *Reflections* [Motown/Universal Japan SHM-CD], the sound was altogether cleaner and better defined.

ABOVE: The JitterBug is a purely passive device, drawing no power from the USB hub, but providing transformer-isolation and RF filtering of both the 5V USB 'VBUS' and its differential data lines. Two JitterBugs may be used in parallel

VERDICT

Considering the modest £39 asking price, it's impossible not to be impressed by the sonic improvement offered by the JitterBug between a computer and DAC. You could spend that much on a takeaway curry for the family!

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

USB Risetime (without/with JitterBug)	22.0nsec / 14.8nsec
Digital jitter (DradonFly, without/with JitterBug)	223psec / 165psec
Dimensions (WHD)	19x13x50mm

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The new CE1 speaker which sits in the Evolution Series. Designed and developed entirely in-house, the CE1 inherits the groundbreaking loudspeaker technology from the R1 (Reference Series). On either side of the cabinet a bi-directional slit-shaped port (duct) is covered by an aluminum side panel. The openings are horn-shaped to achieve a smooth airflow. This design reduces port noise, even at high amplitude, and prevents leakage of internal standing waves. The bi-directional (forward and backward) and symmetrical (left to right) layout of the port openings further offsets the driving force to the port to guarantee a responsive and natural bass sound.



The Evolution One ('E1') is a three-way, bass-reflex design employing the company's CST (Coherent Source Transducer) driver in which the tweeter is placed at the acoustic centre of the midrange unit. It is a breathtaking high-end floorstander, modestly-sized and with a compact footprint to make it ideal for the living rooms of many high-end audio enthusiasts and music lovers. As with TAD Labs' Reference designs, the cabinet of the E1 has a teardrop shape.



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AUDIO FILE

CD player/DAC/preamp and power amp. Rated at 2x140W/8ohm
Made by: International Audio Group, China
Supplied by: IAG Ltd, Cambs
Telephone: 01480 447700
Web: www.quad-hifi.co.uk; www.internationalaudiogroup.com
Prices (Play/Stereo): £1400/£1500

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT



Quad Artera Play/Stereo

Both the Quad Artera Play CD player/DAC/preamp (£1400) and matching 140W/ch Stereo power amp (£1500) have separate glass panels that fit into the top recesses and heatsinks along their sides, so they're handsome, modern-looking and oozing luxury. You even get a choice of black or silver fascias.

The Play uses the 32-bit ESS Sabre 9018 8-channel DAC chip, its asynchronous USB input supporting high-resolution media up to 384kHz/32-bit as well as DSD at 64/128/256 files. Although hosting a more than ample number of digital inputs, including two coaxial, two optical and USB-A, there's no Bluetooth (but some future Artera models will have it).

Analogue is addressed through two pairs of line inputs. Ensuring flexibility, outputs include digital via both coax and Toslink optical, and single-ended analogue through RCAs or balanced with XLRs. The Stereo also accepts balanced or unbalanced signals.

The round fascia display is also a touchscreen, a multi-function source selector and volume control – however, we preferred to use the remote. The manual shows you how to operate seemingly hidden functions, like auto-shut-off and the truly useful digital filters.

'The studio sounds on The Beatles' *Revolver* had a visceral presence'

SPINE-TINGLING

In our listening sessions, the best digitally-supplied sounds came from the on-board CD player, followed by an Astell&Kern into optical, with music downloads of varying high-resolution. Filter choice ultimately proved a matter of taste.

With The Beatles' *Revolver* [Capitol], the studio sounds at the beginning of 'Taxman' – including the 'cough' – had a spine-tingling, visceral presence. The layers of sound loops in 'Tomorrow Never Knows' were easily separated. The strings on 'Eleanor Rigby', the liquid feeling of 'I'm Only Sleeping'… the Artera combo encouraged deep concentration on the sound. Lush, gorgeous – the Artera pair always respected the music.

Etta James' intensity shone through with the magnificent remastering of 'I'd Rather Go Blind' [*Tell Mama* – MCA]. The sense of space with the background vocalists and brass section enjoying their own 'layers' was massive, the openness encouraging the focusing on each instrument or voice in turn. And the overall 'picture' was consistent in its positioning, depth, width and height.

With 'She's A Liar', from the box set *The Warner Bros Years 1971-1977* [Rhino], we had to check the filter setting because the sweetness of the upper registers was almost valve-like. And yet at no point was there a softening of the brush sounds or attack of cymbals.

Solo piano at the beginning of 'Today's The Day' was palpably more 'analogue' in its natural chiming, the bass intro to 'Letter' had a roundness and form that delivered in-the-room presence, allied to convincing decay. Then we played the CDs through an outboard (Pro-Ject) transport to see if it also applied to the digital inputs and not just the on-board disc player: it did.

LEFT: The Artera's all-new look relates to the minimalism of Quad's classics, especially the Play [top], which – thanks to its round display/touchscreen – recalls the look of every Quad preamp that had a rotary volume control on its left

VERDICT

Nothing about the Artera range should surprise Quadophiles, as both the Elite and Vena foreshadowed it. Here, modern aesthetics, full digital integration and user friendliness address the 2015 *status quo*. A superb effort with a price that's easy to justify.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	165W / 265W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	195W / 368W / 265W / 150W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, Play/Stereo)	116ohm / 0.014–0.053ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz, Play/Stereo)	+0.0 to –2.71dB/+0.03 to –0.35dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (Play/Stereo)	114.5dB (0dBFs) / 89.0dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, Play/Stereo)	0.001–0.0037% / 0.0003–0.025%
Digital jitter (CD / S/PDIF / USB)	565psec / 65psec / 14psec
Power consumption (Play/Stereo)	8W/488W (36W idle)
Dimensions (WHD, Play/Stereo)	320x105x320/320x158x338mm











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Homesound	Edinburgh	0131 662 1327	**Sonic Synergy**	Swansea	07971 849474
KJ West One	Marylebone	020 7486 8262	**Studio AV**	Eton	01753 863300

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AUDIO FILE

Integrated amplifier with outboard PSU. Rated at 200W/8ohm
Made by: D'Agostino LLC, Connecticut, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.dagostinoinc.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Prices: £43,998 (black); £41,998 (silver)

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT



D'Agostino Momentum Integrated

Here is an integrated amp from a designer who has made zero-compromise a *cri de cœur*. Certainly, the D'Agostino Momentum isn't the first ever integrated with a price to match a loaded Lexus but it just may be the most over-the-top.

It *is* a two-box affair, but not in the sense of conventional amplifier combos, 'separate preamp/separate power amp'. Rather, there's an outboard power supply in the form of a massive slab machined from solid aluminium that sits beneath the main unit.

At first glance you might think you are looking at the Momentum Preamp [*HFN* Nov '13], as they share identical styling, though the dimensions differ. To the left are the on/off and source buttons for choosing between six line inputs. To the right are the by-passable tone controls. In between is the signature illuminated Momentum meter, styled to resemble a classic timepiece. Its 'bezel' is also the rotary volume control. The supplied remote control is also round, too, itself a gorgeous metal construct.

> 'All of a sudden we were 17 again, and didn't even feel the need for a joint'

There's a shock around the back for those with legacy components and no phono-to-XLR adapters. The Momentum Integrated only provides *balanced* inputs. Also fitted are stout speaker binding posts and a socket to accept the umbilical from the power supply.

D'Agostino rates the output at 200W/ch into 8ohm and 400W/ch into 4ohm, although the amp's maximum power can be adjusted.

UNCANNY PRESENCE

This beauty has a charm of its own that was made apparent from the very first notes of Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note]. And we mean *instantly*. Those who have heard Momentum components will be familiar with what may be the most commanding lower octaves in the business.

There's an uncanny presence recreated through the Integrated that combines all of what are arguably the virtues of *authentic* bass reproduction – not least being a sense of the physical. You need only stand next to a kick-drum to 'feel' what bass can do. Even with the title track, Rawls sounded more convincing than we'd heard before.

ZZ Top is as far removed from Lou Rawls as one can go, perhaps, and the opening salvo of 'Gimme All Your Lovin'' [Warner] is blatant in its intent. The Momentum Integrated delivered all of the slam, every erg of the guitar assault, with a freedom from restraint that suggested unlimited power. With our Alexias the Integrated never indicated that it was 'smaller' than its separate stereo power amplifier sibling.

In both cases, the presentation was wall-to-wall, with that elusive, yet treasured ability to make the speakers 'disappear'. If you're addicted to a convincing soundstage, this amplifier will alter your perceptions.

What sealed our esteem for the Momentum Integrated, though, was The Band's *The Band* [Mobile Fidelity]. 'Up On Cripple Creek' has a bass and kick-drum opening that's dry, distinctive and rich with an ambience that means lots of moving air and a clearly palpable sense of space. You can hear the drum-skin stretch. It builds up: a Jew's harp injects the unmistakable metallic twang; swirling Hammond organ; tinkly piano; those moonshine-and-barbecue vocals. All of a sudden, it was 1969, we were 17 and didn't even feel the need for a joint…

ABOVE: Rotating the outer ring of the watchface dial adjusts volume while the defeatable bass and treble controls (right) offer subtle tonal adjustment. The amp and PSU connect via a short umbilical – the former offers six balanced inputs and pairs of 4mm speaker binding posts

VERDICT

We weren't expecting the baby of the range to prove so rewarding. It's an exceptional product irrespective of its topology, blowing away any nagging belief that an integrated is a compromise. Powerful, graceful, musical – and (in black) the sexiest-looking amplifier we can name.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	215W / 295W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	345W / 635W / 1.07kW / 1.62kW
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.33–0.35ohm
Freq. response (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0dB to –3.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/200W)	45mV / 638mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/200W)	93.9dB / 116.9dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.018–0.11%
Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)	116W / 830W (22W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	457x109/102x406mm / 54.4kg

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

Integrated amplifier. Rated at 200W/8ohm
Made by: Krell Industries LLC, Orange, CT, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd, UK
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.krellonline.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £4500

AUDIO FILE



Krell Vanguard

Sharing the look of the Krell Duo 300 power amp [*HFN* Oct '14], the Vanguard is a slightly lower-powered integrated derivative. We have the line-only analogue version here but a future digital module will add Bluetooth aptX, HDMI inputs and output, optical and coaxial inputs, as well as activation of the front panel-mounted USB input.

The Vanguard's bold look owes much to the chassis design and construction of the new Krell Foundation preamp/processor and, inside, is a typically massive power supply with a 750VA toroidal transformer. It also runs coolly thanks to a pair of surprisingly quiet, thermostatically-controlled fans.

Krell's Illusion-series preamplifiers provided the topology of the balanced and fully-discrete Class A preamp stage. Moreover, like earlier Krell integrateds, it offers user-configurable options viewed from a rather archaic display.

'If you like broad vistas, this new Krell amp offers a wall-to-wall spread'

Once you get past the vintage dot-matrix graphics, the panel accesses a menu to allow you to configure input naming and input level trim. At the back, along with the Ethernet and remote control inputs, are three line-inputs, plus one stereo balanced input on an XLR socket. The latest generation gold-plated WBT speaker terminals accept bare wire or spades. Also at the back is the power on/off switch.

That impressive bit of sculpture in the middle of the fascia contains lighting which glows red in standby and blue in operating mode. To its right are the menu display, the IR sensor below it, and a USB-in above. There's no headphone socket.

ABSOLUTE PRECISION

It was The Kinks' *Arthur (Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire)* [Universal] that revealed instantly the Vanguard's prime strength. What this album exposed in seconds is that the Vanguard creates a fabulously *wide* soundstage. We say 'wide', because its front-to-back stage depth is merely OK.

But if you like broad vistas, this amp has a wall-to-wall spread. Central images were solid and properly positioned, but the extremities were just as clearly defined. This amplifier knows how to resolve image placement with the finesse of a Denon DL103 MC.

Bob Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde* [Mobile Fidelity] was a great showpiece for vocal textures, though one needs a sense of humour to wallow in the weirdness that is 'Rainy Day Women #12 & 35' and its drunken feel superimposed on a militaristic beat. Dylan's near-sneer presents a contrast with the Dylan of nearly a half-century later, but the Vanguard integrated presents enough detail to portray both with absolute precision.

ABOVE: As with previous Krell integrateds, there is a welcome lack of clutter. Pushbuttons to the left choose sources and set levels, while accessing the menu (viewed to the right)

The transfer of the title track on George Formby's *When I'm Cleaning Windows...* [Retrospective] is a fabulous means of finding out what a full-range system can extract from what must surely be a limited bandwidth recording – but it was no less satisfying than much newer recordings. While the spectacular ukulele break wasn't as clearly delineated as we've heard through much dearer integrateds, it was still a source of wonder.

Throw on *Kodo: Heartbeat Drummers Of Japan* [Sheffield Lab] if you want to hear what it does in the lowest reaches of one's hearing. Fat and rich, with sufficient attack, if not quite delivering the hammer-blow of the S-550i [*HFN* Jul '13]. The latter lacks any digital option (a crucial factor today), while the Vanguard seems more forgiving of the rest of one's system. It rose to the brutal challenge of the Wilson Alexias, if not quite testing its bottom octaves, while it also seemed at home with small monitors like the LS3/5As.

If a component can exhibit 'attitude', then this amp never sounds sniffy about what it's fed, nor what it is feeding. We even had a quick burst with the sub-£120 Pioneer SP-BS22-LR speakers. OK, they belie their size and price, but they're hardly what you'd hook up to an amp costing £4.5k. The Krell loved 'em, made 'em sing.

VERDICT

A solid, commanding performer, and something of a bargain. It maintains a Krell tradition, yet with balanced input, full remote control, user-adjustable settings and the forthcoming digital module, it's a 'proper' Krell for the 21st century.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	225W / 380W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	270W / 510W / 348W / 185W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.067–0.090ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.01dB to –2.06dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/200W)	11mV / 162mV (Balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/200W)	88.8dB / 111.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.0067–0.017%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	74W/650W (10W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	434x105x445mm / 17.7kg

AUDIO FILE

Integrated amp with S/PDIF & USB DAC. Rated at 200W/8ohm
Made by: Harman International Ind., Northridge, CA, USA
Supplied by: Karma-AV, York
Telephone: 01423 358846
Web: www.marklevinson.com; www.karma-av.co.uk
Price: £10,500



Mark Levinson No585

Recently, parent company Harman opened a brand new electronics R&D facility in Connecticut and this new 'entry-level' amp is Mark Levinson's first integrated since 2006, when the old No383 was discontinued. Rated at 200W/8ohm, the No585 is a considerably more beefy, fully balanced Class AB design employing 12 output devices for each channel in a double mono configuration. There are digital inputs too.

At the heart of the amplifier's on-board digital audio processing stage is an ESS Sabre 32-bit DAC with proprietary jitter reduction and fully balanced, discrete current-to-voltage circuitry. The USB interface allows transfer of PCM files at up to 192kHz/32-bit resolution and DSD natively at both 64 and 128fs with supplied ASIO drivers.

'Bass trombone, doubled by the string bass, went very deep indeed...'

The No585 has multiple optimised separate power supplies, while a 900VA toroidal transformer discretely feeds the power amp channels and analogue preamp circuitry. Linear voltage regulators provide 'a quiet, rock-steady power source for critical preamp and DAC analogue circuitry' says the design team. It employs individual signal switching relays for each of its analogue inputs, while volume adjustment is via discrete 15-bit R-2R resistor ladder networks and low-noise analogue switches.

The No585 has been designed with typically meticulous attention to detail, having a heavy-gauge chassis and card-cage architecture to isolate critical low-level analogue and digital circuitry. Its four analogue and six digital inputs cover pretty much all possible source requirements and the fascia sports buttons for display, polarity, mute, balance, and menu access.

All functions, including standby on/off, can also be accessed via the amplifier's IR handset.

SUPERB TRANSPARENCY

Most owners surely will find it a lovely amplifier to use thanks to its easy-to-read display and ultra-fine volume adjustment. However, DAC filter options are buried in the menu and not *directly* switchable via the handset.

Vantage Point's *Resolution* album at 96kHz/24-bit [AIX Records] revealed just how vigorous a performer the amplifier is, and confirmed its first-rate transparency to fine detail. It delivered convincing images of the musicians performing in a natural space, all the while the sound remaining endearingly luscious and 'relaxed', with a smooth midrange and sweet treble but without ever appearing too creamy and mellow.

On *New Moon Daughter* [Blue Note] Cassandra Wilson's opening 'Strange Fruit' had all the sumptuousness and atmosphere we are accustomed to hearing from this track, with the cornet solo at the beginning occupying a perfect space at the rear of the soundstage. The reverberation tails sounded convincingly natural.

We were entranced by the manner in which the amplifier portrayed the atmosphere in her psychedelic jazz re-working of Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart's classic 'Last Train To Clarkesville'.

In comparisons with a T+A DAC 8 [*HFN* Oct '12] and Antelope Audio Zodiac Platinum [*HFN* Feb '15] we never felt the least bit short-changed listening to the No585's built-in D-to-A converter There's much to be said for having everything integrated – though future upgrading becomes less straightforward, of course.

Due to its crisp immediacy we sometimes thought it a little 'lean' in bass weight, only to be caught off guard by recordings with *true* low-bass content – *eg*, 'Comes Love' from Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now* at 96kHz/24-bit resolution [Reprise], when the bass trombone doubled by the string bass suddenly goes very deep indeed. So the No585 is *very* revealing of LF detail.

ABOVE: The rotary source selector and volume controls are also used to navigate the amplifier's configuration menu – such as naming/trimming inputs. They flank the unit's red display

VERDICT

The No585 sounds simply sublime and delivers adequate power to drive even pretty demanding loudspeakers. Its built-in hi-res PCM and DSD-capable USB DAC makes it even more desirable.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	285W / 455W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	355W / 635W / 988W / 1211W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.025–0.130ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.03dB to –1.28dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/200W)	25mV / 365mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (Analogue/Digital)	89.4dB (0dBW) / 107.7dB (0dBFs)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, An/Dig)	0.05-0.0045% / 0.12-0.040%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	88W / 845W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	434x193x506mm / 34kg

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

Class D integrated amplifier. Rated at 50W/8ohm
Made by: Spec Corp., Tokyo, Japan
Supplied by: NuNu Distribution
Telephone: 0203 5442338
Web: http://spec-corp.co.jp; www.nunudistribution.co.uk
Price: £3900

AUDIO FILE



SPEC RSA-717EX

Company co-founder Shirozaku Yazaki had been an inveterate hi-fi hobbyist in his spare time, designing and building his own valve-based amplification. This interest informs SPEC's solid-state Class D amps – like this £3900 RSA-717EX – which aim to recreate the distinctive characteristics of 300B-powered amplification, described by the company as 'Real Sound'.

It's the least expensive amplifier in the SPEC range, delivering a claimed 50W/8ohm, and double that into a 4ohm load, figures which our lab tests showed it just about achieves. On first acquaintance, the RSA-717EX impresses with the simplicity of its design and the quality of its build.

The casework is both admirably compact and beautifully finished, being trimmed with solid spruce side-cheeks and maple isolating feet. Four line-ins are provided, along with outputs for a single set of speakers, while the fascia controls are limited to a source selector and volume control, a speaker on/off switch and a main power switch.

'Via the RSA-717EX there was a wonderful sense of easygoing musicianship'

Remote control is provided by SPEC's RSR-1 handset and receiver, connecting to a socket on the rear panel of the amp. This is an optional extra in some markets but in the UK it's supplied as standard with the amplifier, and provides volume up/down and muting.

One interesting aspect of the design is the use of a switch mode power supply in place of the linear supplies found in previous SPEC amplifiers. It seems the designers decided to see what they could do with a switching PSU after all. And judging from the sound, it appears they've got this one cracked.

CAN'T BE PROVOKED

Two things stand out about the sound: the sweetness and purity of the midband, and the sense of effortless control it exudes, even when you push things up to pretty serious levels.

Whichever speakers we tried, and whatever the music played, it maintained the same smooth, cultured sound, notable for the expressive, unforced way it presented instruments and voices. And the SPEC can really shine when fed from a high-end source.

This isn't the most hard-charging or attacking of amplifiers, it concentrates instead on that lucid and organic – well, valve-like! – sound for which its designers were aiming. But it's hard not to like the enveloping cosiness with which it played James Taylor's *Before This World* [Concord]. Via the RSA-717EX there was a wonderful sense of easygoing musicianship, and a writer/performer with nothing to prove, just making a recording because he wanted to.

ABOVE: Build is impressive from the quality metalwork to those spruce side panels. Controls are kept to a minimum of source and volume, plus switches for power and speaker on/off. Line-ins include three on RCA and one balanced XLR, plus 4mm speaker binding posts, all good-quality WBT parts

Don't think the SPEC can't play loud or rock out, as this was made clear with some vintage ZZ Top. That combination of hard-hitting rhythm section and boogying guitar break on 'Cheap Sunglasses', from *Chrome, Smoke & BBQ* [Warner] was delivered convincingly, albeit in a rather polite fashion. A little of the snarl of the guitar was dialled out, and bass-lines were deep and rich rather than entirely whip-crack fast, but the whole thing was still hugely entertaining, albeit in a slightly 'audiophile' fashion.

With the Kansas City Symphony's recording of Saint-Saëns's Symphony No 3 [Reference Recordings], the SPEC made the most of the big, lush sound of the orchestra and organ, as well as giving a shimmering view of the solo piano in the final movement. There was not *quite* the ambience on offer via a more upfront-sounding amp, but both recording and performance were massively enjoyable.

The same goes for the SCO's new SACD of Mozart opera overtures and arias [Linn Records]. The SPEC view of proceedings was again rich and warm, but there was no shortage of drive or rhythmic acuity in the overtures, while the soprano soloist (Elizabeth Watts) had plenty of character, and a quite deliciously luminous quality to her voice. Again, if it wasn't the most explicit sound we've heard, it was very enjoyable.

VERDICT

For all the 'Real Sound' billing, the presentation of the SPEC amplifier is best described as 'characterful'. Fortunately it's a character likely to appeal to many with its bass richness, smooth treble and a clear, natural midband presentation.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	55W / 98W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	56W / 103W / 188W / 301W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.065–1.94ohm
Freq. response (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	–0.25dB to +1.10dB/–10.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/50W)	70mV / 500mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/50W)	79.7dB / 96.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.0044–0.10%
Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)	8W / 110W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	350x95x375mm / 7kg

AUDIO FILE

Stereo power amplifier. Rated at 100W/8ohm
Made by: Benchmark Media Systems, Syracuse, NY, USA
Supplied by: SCV Distribution Ltd, Herts, UK
Telephone: 03301 222500
Web: www.benchmarkmedia.com; www.scvdistribution.co.uk
Price: £2895

hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE



Benchmark AHB2

Benchmark's £2895 AHB2 power amplifier doesn't conform to any of the stereotypes for big American high-powered amps: it's very small, light and designed to be cool-running without any recourse to forced air-flow. (There are substantial side-mounted heatsinks.)

Claiming 100W/8ohm, and up to 480W/6ohm as a bridged monoblock, it weighs less than 6kg and is not much more than half the width of usual hi-fi components (although there's a standard 19in wide rack-mount faceplate option).

The inputs are only on XLR sockets, but the speaker outputs are provided on both combination binding posts and Neutrik SpeakON terminals, these extending to separate L/R outputs, plus a single central connector for use when the amplifier is bridged.

> 'The amp has power in reserve for big orchestral works to burst forth'

Bridging is set using a simple stereo/mono switch on the fairly tightly packed rear panel, which also carries a three-position sensitivity selector and 12V trigger sockets – allowing multiple AHB2 amplifiers to be switched on and off together, or controlled by one of Benchmark's DACs, which have variable-level outputs so they can be used straight into the amp.

The fascia has just one control, for on/off, while indicators for muting, clipping and over-temperature are provided. Benchmark suggests that full rated performance is reached in less than one minute. So there's 'no reason to keep the AHB2 powered on when not in use.'

Benchmark also says that the peak power output of the amplifier is unaffected by mains input voltage or speaker load. In practice, the very efficient 'mixed Class A/B and H' amplifier adapts its power supply voltage to signal conditions, claiming to combine a Class A-like freedom from crossover distortion with the low waste heat and power consumption of a Class D design.

BIGGER THAN IT LOOKS

Almost from the off the diminutive AHB2 showed that it can deliver a much bigger sound than one might expect from its size, and is capable of serious level, speed and dynamic attack. We began with some classic Police tracks, from the hi-res release of *Ghost In The Machine* [A&M], the Benchmark immediately impressing with the punch with which the bass and drums were delivered on 'Spirits In The Material World'. And it kept it all together however loud we decided to play things.

The Benchmark then made clear, to striking effect, every syllable and nuance of Billy Bragg's 'Handyman Blues' from *Tooth & Nail* [Cooking Vinyl]. And with the atmospheric Sun Studios recording of The Dodge Brothers' *The Sun Set* [Weeping Angel Records] it did a superb job with the pounding, foot-stamping, hand-clapping percussion of 'Mr Jones' while keeping the laconic lyrics, Mike Hammond's banjo and Mark Kermode's plaintive harmonica very much to the fore.

What's more, when we loaded up hi-res tracks from Bowie's *The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust...* [RCA] we were struck by just how much focus and clarity was on offer. It gave a delicious sense of the music having more presence and vitality about it, forty-odd years falling away to make it sound as good as memory suggests it did all that time ago. Bowie's voice was close-focused and packed with character, the music had real weight and substance, especially in the title track, and that ability to listen in to the elements of the mix was as appealing as ever.

That subjective speed and dynamic ability was also deployed to good effect when playing a wide variety of classical music. Here its handling of microdynamics kept the elements of a small string ensemble beautifully tight and well-realised, while the amp still had plenty of power in reserve for those big orchestral works to burst forth when required.

ABOVE: Just over 11in in width, the AHB2 is available with either a silver or black fascia, and a 19in face plate is optional. A row of fascia LEDs shows muting, clipping and over-temp fault conditions

VERDICT

The Benchmark AHB2 is an amplifier seemingly impossible to wrongfoot, and it delivers a quite remarkable sound from a seemingly impossibly small package. If it doesn't make you smile every time you listen, we don't know what will.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	106W / 200W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	108W / 200W / 346W / 230W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.034–0.17ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.01dB to –0.93dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/100W)	204mV / 2035mV (Balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/100W)	106.0dB / 126.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.0001–0.0014%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	19W / 305W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	280x98x237mm / 5.7kg



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AUDIO FILE

Single-Ended triode tube amplifiers. Rated at 100W/8ohm
Made by: KR Audio Electronics sro, Prague
Supplied by: Audio Emotion Ltd, Scotland
Telephone: 01333 425999
Web: www.kraudio.com; www.audioemotion.co.uk
Price: £32,400 (pair)

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

KR Audio Kronzilla DX



After reviewing the Kronzilla SXI integrated amplifier [*HFN* Aug '13] we've been looking forward to hearing what the company's flagship, gas-guzzling Kronzilla DX monoblocks might deliver, priced at a somewhat eye-watering £32,400 per pair…

Prague-based KR Audio builds its range of amplifiers entirely in-house. It even employs skilled artisans who blow the glass to manufacture its own KR-branded valves – in this case the 31cm-tall T-1610, a dual-triode capable of producing 50W in a single-ended implementation. There really is nothing quite like it.

All KR Audio's Kronzilla amps employ discrete J-FET devices in the front-end circuit and electron tubes with an output transformer in the final stage – to deliver 'real valve sound' with potentially lower noise and hum compared to hybrids with tube preamplifier stages.

Says KR Audio: 'Our T-160 can be difficult to drive because of its relatively low input impedance, so a FET is used to maintain linearity while driving large voltage swings.'

The tubes are spec'd for 10,000 hours, but should an accident occur, replacement tubes cost over £1000 each! You might also want to bear in mind that running a pair of DX monoblocks for a few hours every day will likely see your electricity bill increase by a couple of hundred pounds a year as well.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

Having previously enjoyed the sound of KR's Kronzilla SXI integrated, we hoped for some family resemblance – and we sure weren't disappointed. We had the feeling that these meaty monoblocks deliver a heftier, more voluptuous and richer-toned low end than the SXI integrated, and consequently the sound appears slightly less snappy and sprightly.

But the bass *is* fantastic, each power amp keeping a vice-like grip on our B&W 802D's woofers as the synthesized bass line of Yello's 'Junior B' from *The Eye* [Motor Music] threatened to rattle the light fittings from the walls as we cranked up the volume to 'party level'.

Similarly when hearing Boz Scaggs' heavenly 'Thanks To You' from his 2001 album *Dig* [Virgin] the infra-bass detail was quite sublime, as was the depth and sheer scale of the sonic picture.

Where the Kronzilla family resemblance seemed most apparent was the manner in which the monoblocks encouraged the B&W floorstanders to throw up a vividly etched sound image across the room's back wall, far exceeding the speakers' boundaries.

> 'We were seduced by the DX power amplifiers' immersive charms'

Traditional SET amplifiers suffer not only from limited power output, but often from a curtailed frequency extension. Not so here: there was nothing soft or rose-tinted about the sound, midrange and high frequencies appearing 'fast' and crisp yet remaining mellifluous and seductive.

Where these SET monoblocks truly shone was when playing more natural-sounding recordings. Dipping into a few tracks from *The Saturday Sessions From The Dermot O'Leary Show* [Sony] showcased the DX power amps' delicious delicacy and expressiveness. As we enjoyed hearing the likes of London Grammar and Nerina Pallot we were seduced by these power amps' immersive charms, working wonders at bringing us close to the unique sounds and emotions of each musical event.

ABOVE: A pair of huge, hand-crafted dual-triode tubes, featuring polished brass bases and tinted glass, are connected in parallel for this 100W-rated single-ended monoblock. Two amps are required for stereo

VERDICT

Should 50W/ch prove insufficient to drive the loudspeakers in your room, you like to play it large, and price is really no obstacle… well, the sight of a DX's paralleled T-1610s placed adjacent to each of your monitors might simply be too much to resist.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<3% THD, 8/4ohm)	102W / 100W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	107W / 99W / 45W / 21W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	1.27–1.18ohm
Freq. response (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	+0.78dB to –1.5dB/–13.8dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/100W)	119mV / 1261mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/100W)	79.6dB / 99.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.52–2.6%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	475W/480W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	385x415x550mm / 37kg

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AUDIO FILE

Integrated triode tube amplifier. Rated at 80W/8ohm
Made by: Mei Xing Electronics, China
Supplied by: Ming Da Valve Audio UK
Telephone: 01684 293111
Web: www.mingda.co.uk
Price: £34,950 (pair)

hi-finews HIGHLY COMMENDED

Ming Da Dynasty Cantabile-Grandé MC998-A



ABOVE: This sturdy two-box mono amplifier is very well finished and crowned by the striking FU80 tube in its 'space age' enclosure

This is one of a fascinating new sub-species of valve amplifier – the high-end audio equivalent of a monster truck. With the £34,950 Ming Da Dynasty Cantabile-Grandé MC998-A monoblocks it's hard to get a real sense of their positively Brobdingnagian proportions without regarding them in the metal, so to speak.

Each amplifier comprises two boxes that together weigh some 70kg. The lower box is the power supply, and the upper one the amplifier itself, where you will see the massive FU80 RF Pentode punching into the air like a Shanghai skyscraper. A single JJ ECC83 and Tung Sol 6L6 ride shotgun.

Says Ming Da's founder (and the designer) Jigui Xiao 'The output is 80W in Class A – this is a powerful pentode that requires a strong and reliable power supply', adding that the FU80 RF has a power output 'that few other valves can match.'

The juice for the plate/grid voltage and for the filament voltage comes from separate power transformers, and that's partly why a two-chassis per channel model was used. With 450W of anode dissipation, there's no underestimating how serious this is.

> 'The Ming Da amp was completely unfazed by the scale of "Oxygene 4"'

Ming Da makes all of its products from the ground up, and that includes the output transformers, said to use 'the best Japanese steel laminations available, along with the best oxygen-free copper wire'. Care has also been paid to the passive componentry: Jensen and Sic Safco capacitors are used, along with Mills Audio, AMRG and Takman Rex resistors. Jensen pure silver wire and high quality bronze rhodium-coated input RCA connectors and speaker cable output binding posts are also fitted to the MC998-A.

LIMITLESS EFFECT

The Ming Da Cantabile-Grandé is accommodating in its ability to play pretty much any kind of music you choose, at almost any reasonable volume, with no apparent ill effects. Cue up some classic rock music such as Dire Straits' 'Money For Nothing' [*Brothers In Arms* – Vertigo] and snare drums are tight and well damped, bass guitar taut and tuneful, and lead guitar raw and cutting. This monster amp throws out a wide and powerful soundstage with real depth too.

Moving on to some iconic electronic music in the shape of Jean Michel Jarre's 'Oxygene 4' [*Essentials And Rarities* – Sony], we found the Ming Da completely unfazed by the huge scale of the recording, taking the speakers by the scruff of the neck and commanding them to punch out an almighty, Phil Spector-like 'wall of sound'. Within this, there was a wonderful sense of proportion, with excellent image placement and uncannily real depth perspective.

Mozart's March, K189, played by the SCO [Linn Records] showed just how inherently open and neutral this amplifier is. Image placement was excellent, and the recorded acoustic was conveyed brilliantly. Strings soared and brass stabbed, giving a great sense of the music's dynamic direction.

VERDICT

This seminal power amplifier sounds excellent across all types of music, is less intimidated by loudspeakers than many an esoteric valve amp, and needs absolutely no excuses made for its bass performance. This unique, exotic design warrants serious consideration if you think big is beautiful.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<4% THD, 8/4ohm)	66W / 71W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	70W / 75W / 40W / 19W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	3.05–0.77ohm
Freq. response (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	+1.6dB to –1.5dB/–11.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/80W)	222mV / 2145mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/80W)	80.9dB / 99.9dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.50–10.2%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	475W/460W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	440x860x455mm / 65kg

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Pre & power valve amplifiers. Rated at 2x155W/8ohm
Made by: Audio Research Corp, Minnesota, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.audioresearch.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Prices (Pre/Power): £12,250/£17,000

AUDIO FILE



Audio Research GSPre/GS150

With the Galileo Series, designer Livio Cucuzza and his team have aimed to reflect classic Audio Research pieces in homage to founder Bill Johnson's legacy. And the results are revelatory.

'The GS duo brought tears to our eyes, such was its emotional power'

We first saw the GS150 at Munich's 2014 High End Show, and had the impression it must be a 'REF 150 light' [see *HFN* Feb '12] with better aesthetics and beefed up by the new Tung-Sol KT150 output valves. It does indeed look like an undercover REF 150, from the fully balanced design (there are no single-ended inputs) down to the rear variable speed whisper fans.

By contrast, the GSPre is less obviously a REF 5 in new attire [see *HFN* Jan '10]. The new 'retro' preamp has two large rotaries for volume and source selection and buttons catering for power, mono, muting, headphone switching and access to the limited onboard menu. The GSPre also offers a pair of balanced and four single-ended inputs alongside balanced and single-ended outputs.

The programmable phono stage is a separate circuit powered by two 6H30 tubes and can accommodate a variety of MM and high output MC cartridges. However, while the GSPre boasts a tube-based headphone amplifier, it hasn't gone the whole hog and dropped in a DAC like the GSi75 integrated.

Before operating the power amp, you have to install the four 6H30 valves and the two matched quads of KT150 output valves. As shipped, bias is set to a nominal 65mA per KT150 and the GS150 is otherwise ready to go out of the box.

ABOVE: The GSPre [top] marks a return to traditional rotary and pushbutton controls. The former also facilitate navigation of the on-board menu. The GS150's analogue meters show mains line voltage, tube bias current and power output

IMMERSIVE SPACES

Using Sonus faber Ex3ma loudspeakers a large, transparent, colourful and multi-layered musical wall-to-wall canvas opened like a hovering parachute, the enfolding acoustic conferring a sense of space that was both staggering and utterly immersive.

Whether with the complexity of Beethoven, the romanticism of Berlioz or Handel's religiousness, Dylan's raucity, Sinatra's velvety crooning or Supertramp's buoyant productions, the GS150 took charge of all the musical proceedings with poise and aplomb, presence and control, exhibiting clarity, speed, and supreme resolution of instrumental and vocal textures.

We listened to Mariza's *Transparente* [EMI] where she sings 'Duas Lágrimas De Orvalho' (solo voice accompanied by a weeping cello), and there were tears in our eyes, such was the power of the GS duo to convey pathos, emotion, sadness, suffering and pain.

VERDICT

The GS150 is not only the finest sounding but also the most beautiful stereo amplifier Audio Research has ever built. The GSPre is the perfect partner both aesthetically and sonically.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	171W / 170W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	185W / 185W / 200W / 175W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	995-315ohm / 0.600-1.00ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to –0.55dB / +0.1 to –0.2dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	204mV (pre) / 170mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	96.2dB (pre) / 88.3dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0004-0.0026%/0.038-0.098%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	90W / 470W/780W
Dimensions (WHD Pre/150)	483x197x438/483x251x572mm

AUDIO FILE

Preamp & stereo power amplifier. Rated at 200W/8ohm
Made by: Constellation Audio, Newbury Park, CA, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.constellationaudio.com, www.absolutesounds.com
Prices (Pre/Power): £10,000 (each)

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT



Constellation Audio Inspiration 1.0

If Constellation Audio's debut Reference Series offered the stuff of audiophile dreams then these new Inspiration amps, at £10k a pop, threaten to set new standards of performance at a more affordable price point.

Cost savings have been made by building the cases from aluminium slabs rather than solid billets, and the front panel is flat, not sculpted.

'The sound is on the dark side of neutral; and it's one you can almost taste'

Meanwhile, the Inspiration Preamp 1.0 has its power supply built into the front of the unit, rather than outboard, and the Stereo 1.0's input and gain stages are on one PCB instead of separated as in its larger amplifiers.

All the other genes that inform the Constellation DNA are there: the 'Line Stage Gain Module', the 'Direct' interface, the fully balanced audio circuitry, the mechanically isolated circuit boards.

The preamp's simple fascia has one rotary button for balance, another for volume, either side of a generous touch screen. Five buttons control all the menus – power on/standby, input selection and levels, mute, phase, bypass, screen setup (brightness, contrast and timeout). The Stereo 1.0, too, is simplicity itself, though both take their time to warm up.

REVELATORY

All Constellation Audio amplifiers allow you to enjoy a degree of transparency which has until now, with a few honourable exceptions, eluded solid-state technology. And yet, paradoxically, the sound is on the dark side of neutral. More like dark chocolate it's a sound you can almost taste.

With a clear recording you can hear all the way into the back of the stage without any impediment or obstruction. This see-through magic also applies with small-scale recordings that otherwise might sound claustrophobic.

Take António Zambujo's 'Nem Às Paredes Confesso' from *Outro Sendido* [Universal Music Portugal]. It's a simple studio recording (voice and guitar) but also slightly claustrophobic. So the engineer placed him inside an 'electronic bubble' that seems to expand with each heartbreaking utterance. The Inspiration allows one to distinguish between the fake hazy air inside the 'bubble' and what little air there is in a small dead studio.

The Inspiration Stereo 1.0 also reproduces the airiness of concert hall acoustics with uncanny realism. A good example is Mitsuko Uchida playing Mozart's Piano Concerto No 23, live with the Cleveland Orchestra [Decca], where you can hear stage noises, the squeaking of a distant door, and the occasional coughing off-axis in both channels, so clearly located they help to map the concert hall precisely.

You need lots of power to reproduce a big band or a symphony orchestra at full throttle. But it only took a few bars with Iván Fischer his Budapest orchestra in *Mendelssohn Session* [Native DSD], to reveal the beauty of the holographic image, the purity of timbre and the awesome dynamic swings conveyed by this DSD256 master. We sat flabbergasted, listening as if we were beamed up to the MUPA Concert Hall itself.

ABOVE: A 432x230-pixel screen on the preamp's fascia is flanked by rotaries for balance and volume. Pressing and holding the bar on the front of the Stereo 1.0 initiates a series of self-diagnostic checks

VERDICT

This combination reproduces music with a freedom, neutrality and conviction that belies even this substantive price tag. It's a revolution in the world of audio.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	395W / 660W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	470W / 845W / 1.20kW / 420W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	119ohm / 0.033–0.045ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	–0.0 to +0.0dB / –2.1 to –0.4dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	47mV (pre) / 157mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	91.0dB (pre) / 91.6dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0015–0.0019%/0.0013–0.033%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	27W / 127W/856W
Dimensions (WHD Pre/Power)	432x133x381/432x216x483mm

SME MODEL 15



hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

The Model 15 could be described as 'the ultimate in recovery vehicles', allowing the cartridge to retrieve the last nth of recorded material whether, digital or analogue, from the vinyl disc and thus approaches the ultimate in perfection. Receiving its inspiration from the superb Model 10 precision turntable the Model 15 seeks to emulate the excellence of our Models 20/3 & 30/2 turntables whilst retaining the more compact footprint preferred by many of our enthusiasts. The SME Model 15 has been designed with the same attention to detail combined with simplicity of operation that has come to be expected from all SME products. Its superb performance together with laid back styling make it a glamourous addition to your sound system that will astound and amaze listeners for many years to come.

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AUDIO FILE

Pre & mono power amplifiers. Rated at 250W/8ohm
Made by: GamuT A/S, Denmark
Supplied by: Stoneaudio UK Ltd, Dorset
Telephone: 01202 630 066
Web: www.gamutaudio.com; www.stoneaudio.co.uk
Prices (Pre/Power): £5770/£17,315 (pair)

hi-finews HIGHLY COMMENDED



GamuT D3i/M250i

If your speakers are able to handle it, the £5770 GamuT D3i preamp and £8658-apiece M250i monoblocks (with a rated output power of 250W/8ohm) are likely to rearrange not only your expectations of the sheer clout a hi-fi system can deliver, but also some of your furniture – should you really decide to wind the wick up!

The D3i preamp uses shielded internal compartments to avoid interference and noise. In silver or black, its anodised aluminium fascia just has input and volume controls, and an indicator panel. Inputs are provided at line-level on four sets of single-ended RCA phonos and one set of balanced XLRs.

Although one set of inputs is called 'RIAA' at the front and 'MM/MC' at the rear, to connect a turntable you're going to need an external phono preamplifier. Both the balanced CD inputs and one set of line-ins can be set to a unity-gain bypass mode. Outputs are on both RCA phonos and two sets of balanced XLRs, with all socketry from Neutrik. Naturally, a remote control handest is also provided.

The D3i is a dual-mono preamp designed for 'low impedance and wide bandwidth' with MOSFET input and output buffering and separate power supplies for each channel. It even has special feet to provide a 'compliant chassis suspension'.

For the M250i GamuT uses just one complementary pair of very large MOSFETs to do the job, saying 'a powerful amplifier made with 32 transistors is more likely to sound like a choir than a single and clear voice'. There's a massive power supply, while a monitoring circuit detects HF distortion content above 20kHz should you manage to provoke clipping, and there's short-circuit/low-impedance detection which will mute the amp.

> 'They deliver a sound that's loud, proud and in the face when required'

JAW-DROPPING GRIP

The GamuT amps are an absolute riot, not just finding information in tracks lesser amplification merely suggests might be there but proving entirely unburstable right up to the limits of what a pair of speakers can handle. They deliver a sound that's loud, proud and in the face when required, but are equally at home shimmering through delicate acoustic recordings at low levels.

Play some close-recorded jazz, like the title track from Kyle Eastwood's *The View From Here* [Jazz Village], which opens with Eastwood's bass and Andrew McCormack's piano in unison laying down the riff of the track over Martin Kaine's drums, and the timbre and speed of the bass is superbly realised as a distinct instrument. When they break and go their separate ways, the understated bass line remains metronomic and tightly defined.

Play some vintage Queen and the way John Deacon's bass and Roger Taylor's drums lock together to rocket the music along is inescapable – whether with 'Seven Seas Of Rhye' from *Queen II* [Island] or 'Another One Bites The Dust' from *The Game* [Island].

Bjork's latest album, *Vulnicura* [One Little Indian] is challenging at CD quality, even more so in 96kHz/24-bit, especially on tracks like 'Black Lake', with its electronic bass coming from somewhere down in the depths. Here, the GamuTs' ability to both grip and drive our PMC OB1 speakers was, to put it mildly, jaw-dropping.

ABOVE: Rotary controls on the D3i govern input selection and volume. Buttons are for dim/bypass/mute. The robust, no-nonsense styling carries through to the M250i (one of a stereo pair is shown here)

VERDICT

The GamuTs have all the agility and finesse required for fine sound, but underpinned with a massive sense of power and total control. This amplifier combination is priced well into the high-end, but it's worth every penny.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	330W / 630W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	363W / 704W / 1320W / 1120W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	145ohm / 0.019-0.027ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to –7.2dB / +0.0 to –3.3dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	550mV (pre) / 102mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	98.1dB (pre) / 85.4dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0001-0.0007%/0.0009-0.11%
Power consumption (pre/power)	17W / 417W (43W, idle)
Dimensions (WHD, Pre/Power)	431x111x420/431x164x470mm

"It's easily the best DAC I've ever heard in my system, making digitally-recorded music sound better than I've ever heard it"

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PS AUDIO

hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE

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It's time to rediscover your music collection.

AUDIO FILE

Pre & power amplifier with USB input. Rated at 250W/8ohm
Made by: NAD Electronics International, Canada
Supplied by: Sevenoaks Sound and Vision, UK
Telephone: 01732 740944
Web: http://nadelectronics.com; www.sevenoakssoundandvision.co.uk
Prices (Pre/Power): £3299 (MDC modules extra)/£2699

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED



NAD Masters M12/M22

New to the Master Series are this £3299 M12 preamplifier, and £2699 M22 250W per channel stereo power amp. Both draw heavily on developments elsewhere in the NAD mainstream range, and previous generations of Masters Series products. The M12 preamp can be fitted with a card supporting the multiroom/wireless functionality of NAD stablemate Bluesound, and another with HDMI audio capability and video pass-through.

'When fed with dark and electronic material, the atmosphere was tangible'

Both the M12 and the M22 are beautifully constructed and finished, with fascia clutter kept to a minimum. The M12 has a clear, sharp colour touchscreen display for all its functionality, plus a large volume control, and there's plenty of flexibility in the menus.

As standard, the M12 preamp comes with hard-wired socketry for optical and coaxial digital outputs, balanced and single-ended preouts, outputs for two subwoofers, control connections via 12V trigger in/out sockets, an IR sensor input and an RS232 socket, plus three MDC cards already installed.

This trio encompasses phono (adjustable between MC and MM) plus line-ins on RCA phonos and XLRs; a digital module with two optical inputs, two coaxial and an AES/EBU input on a three-pin XLR; and USB and computer inputs on Type-A and Type-B sockets, with another Type-A input below the volume control on the fascia.

Adding the BluOS module (an extra £399) means the preamp gains wireless/wired networking, streaming content at up to 192kHz/24-bit; aptX Bluetooth; and access to Internet radio and streaming services. It also offers two extra USB sockets.

The matching M22 power amp has both balanced and single-ended inputs, and a single pair of substantial combination terminals for each channel's speaker output, plus a 12V trigger input to allow it to be switched on and off remotely by the M12. This is a hybrid digital amp, designed to give, says NAD, 'massive analogue emotion'.

ABOVE: Both the M12 [top] and M22 have a notable lack of any physical controls beyond touch-sensitive on/standby 'buttons'. Settings on the preamplifier can be made using the touchscreen display

VIVID PRESENTATION

In absolute terms, the M12/M22 package is perhaps just a shade sweeter than we'd like in the treble – there were just a few occasions when we found ourselves hankering for a smidge more sting – *eg*, with Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'That Ain't My America' [*God & Guns*, Roadrunner].

But as a burst from Yes's 'Roundabout' from *Fragile* [Rhino, 96kHz/24-bit download] made clear, it also has a directness of communication, betraying no sense of the amount of digital processing through which the signal has passed on its way from source to speakers.

It unravelled the complexities of the track while still shaking the room with bass, punching the music along, and at the same time giving an intimate view of the acoustic guitar and voice when required.

Fed with something dark and electronic, Ólafur Arnalds' music for the TV series *Broadchurch* [Mercury], and the claustrophobic, menacing atmosphere was almost tangible, so well did the M12/M22 handle everything from the droning bass and stabbing percussion to the almost Glass-like melodic lines drifting above them.

VERDICT

With a refined, powerful sound even when pushed hard, the M12/M22 combination is designed for real-world use, not the tweaking brigade. The M12's flexibility is especially impressive, while the optional BluOS module adds even more useful capability.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	295W / 360W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	400W / 780W / 750W / 450W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, M12/M22)	91-150ohm/0.005-0.014ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-90kHz, M12 Dig/M22)	+0.0 to –11.2dB/+0.06 to –2.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/250W)	101mV / 1630mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (M12 Digital/M22)	115.8dB (0dBFs) / 82.2dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, M12 Dig/M22)	0.00017-0.011% / 0.0004-0.041%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	31W / 570W (M12, 29W)
Dimensions (WHD, M12/M22)	435x133x383/435x103x379mm

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT



Naim Statement NAC/NAP S1

AUDIO FILE

Pre & monoblock power amplifiers. Rated at 746W/8ohm
Made by: Naim Audio Ltd, Salisbury
Supplied by: Naim Audio Ltd
Telephone: 01722 426600
Web: www.naimaudio.com
Price: £155,000

At the price of a Bentley Flying Spur everything here is on the grand scale. The Statement looks unlike anything else in the core Naim range, and goes beyond anything else the company has ever made, not least in its power output – quoted as 'one horsepower'!

'It was an experience that made you just sit in silence when the music stopped'

Massive power supplies are anchored in the base of each of the three units, separated from the signal electronics to keep eddy currents from the transformers at bay. In the NAC S1 preamp, this lower section also contains the input/output circuitry, housed in a perforated Faraday cage. In the 'upper floors' of the preamp enclosure, the circuitry is mounted vertically, with boards attached via coiled springs to the main frame.

The entire construction uses only through-hole passive components and discrete transistors, and even the volume control uses a 'fly-by-wire' system, designed to maintain a constant input and output resistance, and thus frequency response, across the adjustment range.

The NAC S1 provides three inputs on RCA phonos, three on DINs and two on XLRs, with adjustable gain and customisable mapping to the five input selector options, and the option of unity gain. There's one set of balanced outputs on XLRs, to use with the NAP S1 power amps, and two sets of unbalanced outputs on four-pin DINs.

The NAC P1 amplifier plays things pretty simple, with just a single XLR input and a pair of speaker terminals, plus communications sockets to match those on the NAC S1. An internal 'chimney' helps dissipate the considerable heat developed. And loop negative feedback is taken from before the output stage, meaning it's not affected by the speaker load.

LEFT: A simple rotary volume control and touch-sensitive input selectors bely the complexity within the Naim NAC S1 [centre unit] – inputs can be customised and mapped to the virtual 'buttons'. Eight stereo inputs are provided on its rear panel

SHEER INTELLIGIBILITY

We were far from prepared for just what the Statement could do. Most striking of all was its absolute linearity, whatever volume level you chose, and whatever the music you played – from background levels, where it'll surprise you with sheer intelligibility, right up to its ability to do the 'go on, you know you want to' thing. All the while it tells you more about instruments, voices and performances than you'd ever imagined possible.

ELP's fabulously dense and percussive 'Toccata', from *Brain Salad Surgery* [Sanctuary Records], is challenging, to say the least, with its powerful drumming and percussion, swinging from gentle piano to thundering synth bass, with swirling programmed sounds and even tubular bells. We were pinned to our seats…

By contrast, the violin plaintively winding its way around the voice in Bach's *St Matthew Passion* aria 'Erbarme Dich' [Linn], while the orchestra maintained the work's heartbeat, was one of those experiences that made you just sit in silence when the music stopped.

VERDICT

The NAC S1/NAP S1 lives up to the title with a sound that's much more than the Naim signature writ large: this is a truly magical amplifier across a huge range of musical styles and listening preferences.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	795W / 1493W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	790W / 1480W / 2610W / 1585W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, NAC/NAP)	215-10ohm / 0.108-0.124ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-100kHz, NAC/NAP)	+0.0 to –13.8dB / +0.0 to –3.25dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	171mV / 88mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBV/0dBW)	96.1dB (NAC S1) / 94.8dB (NAP S1)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0003-0.007%/0.0002-0.0012%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	103W / 1410W (NAC S1, 38W)
Dimensions (WHD, NAC/NAP S1)	270x940x412/256x940x383mm

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hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

Preamp with USB DAC and power amp. Rated at 2x150W
Made by: Primare AB, Sweden
Supplied by: Karma-AV Ltd, York
Telephone: 01423 358846
Web: www.primare.net; www.karma-av.co.uk
Prices (Pre/Power): £3180/£1750

AUDIO FILE



Primare PRE32/A34.2

It's perhaps easy to overlook just how much effort Primare has been ploughing into keeping its mid-market 30-series amps up to date, catering for both the diehard separates fan and those audiophiles happy to combine boxes and save some shelf space.

The PRE32 is the 30-range's dedicated preamp, which costs £1750 in standard, analogue-only guise. In this basic form, with its sleek OLED-equipped front panel and remote control, you get four line-level (RCA) and two balanced (XLR) inputs, alongside two sets of line-level and one set of balanced outputs, to feed a range of power amp options. There's also a fixed-level set of analogue outputs over RCA, for legacy tape recorders, *etc*. All analogue signal paths are kept short and fully balanced, employing Burr-Brown OPA2134 op-amps. Source selection, volume level and balance control are all performed in the analogue domain.

'These amps stay true to the purity of the music without seeming clinical'

Like its R32 phono stage sibling, the PRE32 also uses an R-core power transformer and is DC coupled from input to output via servos – there are no capacitors in the signal path.

There's also the company's MM30 media board, which slots into a dedicated rear port, adding a range of digital inputs (while upping the PRE32's price to £3000). With a Burr-Brown SRC4392 192kHz upsampler and PCM1792 DAC, this extra outlay seems like money well spent. Finally, Primare's £180 aptX Bluetooth module takes a fully-loaded PRE32 preamp up to £3180.

Partnering the PRE32 is Primare's A34.2 power amp, housed in matching silver or black casework. Its input stage also comprises Burr-Brown OPA2134 and Analog Devices AD8512 op-amps while the output stage employs Primare's now very familiar and efficient Class D UFPD technology. Primare also gives you the option to run the A34.2 as a higher-powered monoblock amp in bridged mode.

CLARITY AND RHYTHM

These amps sound as though they have clarity in abundance. But while Bluetooth makes for a worthwhile inclusion, you really need to serve them a richer diet to benefit from everything they have to offer. Exploring a 44.1kHz/16-bit FLAC rip of Future Islands' *Singles* [4AD] ported over USB from a laptop running JRiver, let you know that these amps relish having a more substantial stream to play with.

Percussion on 'Like The Moon' is razor sharp, while being so foot-tapping and rhythmical it's addictive. Bass guitar notes take on a textured, robust quality, and the keyboard's atmospherics go deep and wide within the soundstage as their delayed echoes trail off into the distance. But it's not just the Primares' timing and musical scale that grab your attention, it's the way these amps seem to stay true to the purity of the music without being overly clinical.

With a 96kHz/24-bit FLAC download of the *Adagio* from the 'Arpggione' Sonata, from *Schubert & Schumann* [Naim] the A34.2 showed its character, adding genuine weight to the piano combined with the right degree of delicacy when needed. The cellist was projected with a sense of purpose and poise.

Nor is the heart of the preamp surpassed by its digital add-ons. Playing 'Small Things' from Ben Howard's *I Forget Where We Were* LP [Island] conjured a very organic sonic landscape that was very easy to get lost in. This track's bass reaches very deep but the Primares had no difficulty in plundering these lower registers without over-emphasis. It left you free to relish the most physical of bass without feeling overwhelmed by it.

ABOVE: Both amplifiers are superbly finished and also come in matching titanium silver livery. The PRE32 preamp's OLED display, stainless steel rotary dials and switchgear are pure class! The bridgeable A34.2 power amp [lower unit] offers both XLR and RCA inputs

VERDICT

As an analogue input-only package these amps have lots to offer, but paying for the extra digital internals is a no-brainer, making this a superb system for the modern audiophile.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	210W / 405W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	215W / 410W / 447W / 238W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	92ohm / 0.021–0.091ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-100kHz, pre/power)	+0.02 to –2.4dB/+0.0 to –13.0dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	95.2dB (0dBV) / 82.0dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	0.00009-0.0007% / 0.0006-0.052%
Digital jitter (USB/ S/PDIF)	<10psec / <10psec
Power consumption (pre/power)	31W/340W (22W idle)
Dimensions (WHD, CD/Amp)	430x105x385/430x105x385mm

AUDIO FILE

Preamp with USB DAC and power amp. Rated at 350W/8ohm
Made by: The Rotel Co. Ltd, Japan
Supplied by: Rotel Europe/B&W Group, West Sussex
Telephone: 01903 221500
Web: www.rotel.com
Prices (Pre/Power): £1395/£2395

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED



Rotel RC-1590/RB-1590

Rotel's upmarket 15-Series now features this £1395 RC-1590 preamp and the massive – in every sense – RB-1590 power amplifier, which sells for £2395. Both are solid, neatly turned-out and have controls with a precise, well-engineered feel.

'Bach *Toccatas* played by E Power Biggs unleashed Rotel's beast within'

The RC-1590 is essentially an analogue preamp with a MM phono input and four line-ins (one set on balanced XLRs), but with the addition of an onboard DAC having three optical and three coaxial digital inputs plus a USB-B computer connection for PCM content at up to 192kHz/24-bit plus DSD64/2.8MHz.

A CD provides the drivers needed with a Windows computer (unnecessary with a Mac). There's also an iOS-friendly front-panel USB-A for connection to portable players and USB memory, and aptX Bluetooth complete with antenna.

Audio outputs are on pairs of both RCA phonos and XLRs and there are also two subwoofer outputs. The menu system allows a range of adjustments, including balance and bypassable tone controls.

It's also possible to switch the rear-panel USB input between Class 1.0 and hi-res 2.0, and to set a fixed level on any of the inputs – for example for use with an external surround processor. All these settings are accessible from the remote handset.

The power amp flies in the face of the company's recent use of Class D ICEPower modules, as the RB-1590 is a big ol' no-nonsense Class AB bruiser rated at 350W per channel into 8ohm and boasting extensive protection circuitry. It's a true dual-mono design, with input on both RCAs and XLRs. Outputs are on two sets of terminals for each channel, and there's 12V trigger switching for remote on/off.

ABOVE: Styling is minimalist but not unattractive in its silver livery. Rows of soft-touch buttons govern analogue and digital input selection on the preamp, but it's the sheer scale of the power amp that dominates

EASY-GOING?

Our initial impression was of an amplifier carrying its considerable clout fairly lightly, having both speed and agility to partner its power. What's more, it manages both impressive dynamic ability and a deceptively easy-going presentation, with the kind of smoothness more commonly associated with amps with less ambitious power outputs.

It did unleash some of the beast within when playing Bach *Toccatas* performed by E Power Biggs [Sony], played as stereo DSD64 files through the RC-1590's USB input. And there was no arguing with the ability of the Rotel's DAC stage when it came to presenting the sheer impact of this sound.

Similarly with the rather more laid-back sound of Eric Clapton's classic album *461 Ocean Boulevard* [Polydor] the Rotels did a fine job of motoring the rhythms along while presenting the layering of harmonies and instrumentation with plenty of detail. If there were times when staccato kick-drums could become a tiny bit blurred, it was never to the point when the impetus of the music was lost.

VERDICT

These Rotels do a fine job of delivering a wide range of music with detail and excitement intact. That Rotel has managed to offer all this for very sensible money is a tribute to its design strengths.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	490W / 805W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	565W / 870W / 455W / 235W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	97ohm / 0.014–0.090ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	–0.45 to –0.0dB/–0.14 to –0.03dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (pre/DAC/power)	90.4dB/103.5dB/91.8dB (0dBW)
Dist. (20Hz-20kHz, pre (DAC)/power)	0.0011–0.003% / 0.0006–0.011%
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB)	380psec / 220psec
Power consumption (pre/power)	23W/1.19kW (61W idle)
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	431x144x348/431x237x454mm

“I don’t know these guys from Germany but the sound was fantastic …”

Michael Fremer Stereophile, T.H.E. Show Newport 2013



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AUDIO FILE

Balanced headphone preamp
Made by: Auralic Ltd, Beijing, China
Supplied by: Audio Emotion Ltd, Scotland
Telephone: 01333 425999
Web: www.auralic.com/en; www.audioemotion.co.uk
Price: £1590

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED



Auralic Taurus MkII

In spite of the rising popularity of DAC/headphone amplifier hybrids, if you listen exclusively to analogue sources or already have a high-performance DAC then an extra DAC stage is surplus to requirements. What you then need is a classic headphone amplifier with analogue inputs only – like this £1590 Auralic Taurus MkII.

Its Class A output module is claimed to be inspired by the circuit design of the '8078', the last of the hand-wired analogue mixing consoles produced by renowned electronics engineer Rupert Neve during the 1970s. Like other Neve designs it was admired for what Auralic calls a 'warm, natural sound' – qualities which the Taurus MkII is intended to emulate.

What differentiates the MkII version from the original Taurus (2010) isn't clear from the literature but it seems the board layout has been changed, apparently to shorten the signal path, electromagnetic shielding has been enhanced and the input switching revised to improve isolation of the two inputs and thereby reduce crosstalk between them.

A headline feature of the Taurus is its provision of both balanced and unbalanced inputs and outputs. The inputs are on a pair of back-panel three-pin XLRs and phono sockets, with fascia outputs on a *four*-pin XLR and the usual ¼in sockets. Auralic warns that using mono jack plugs with the unbalanced output could damage the output stages.

Because the Taurus MkII dissipates some 19W at idle, its smart brushed aluminium wraparound case has ventilation holes along both sides, and across the back of the top surface.

Its output capability is sufficient to accommodate transient peaks of 120dB SPL or greater on high dynamic range material, even with low-sensitivity headphones.

THE RIGHT PARTNER

As already mentioned, Auralic has manifestly sought to achieve a warm, refined sound quality with the Taurus MkII. In this it has undoubtedly succeeded: the Taurus MkII would have to be provoked ever to sound hard or harsh, it's just not in its makeup. And therefore it will partner better with 'phones having an explicit sound and less well with those that are in any way reticent to begin with.

We began listening with the 96kHz/24-bit version of Peter Frampton's *Show Me The Way* [A&M, HDtracks], a recording which no-one with any respect for the term would call hi-res, whatever its bit depth and sampling rate. Via the Taurus MkII it sounded just fine, opulent but without any hint of compromised resolution. Just plain enjoyable, in fact.

> 'Kelly's *Rupert Brooke* string elegy sounded big and noble via the Taurus'

The 96kHz/24-bit download [e-onkyo] of Nina Simone's 'Baltimore', from the album of the same name, isn't the highest of res either but its snappy reggae 'ground' tended to highlight the laid-back *mien* of the Taurus MkII.

ABOVE: The Taurus MkII's simple fascia incorporates unbalanced and balanced outputs on ¼in socket and four-pin XLR, with input and output switching by toggling push-buttons; and there's a domed volume knob and power button

Its delivery was smooth, cool, solid but the rhythm dragged a little, and Simone's voice was mildly clouded in comparison to what the very best – by which we mean the *most* informative and engaging – headphone amps could deliver.

Turning attention to the Taurus MkII's bass performance, we selected some challenging tracks heard via the Audeze LCD-2 [*HFN* Mar '13] – 'phones which have exceptional bass extension.

So were we aware of being a little short-changed in the low bass? Arguably the incongruous LF grumblings and pulsings in James Blake's 2010 'Limit To Your Love' [Atlas Records] plunged, perhaps, a little less deeply than expected via the Taurus MkII but honestly you'd have to listen out for this to notice it, and even then we wouldn't say it would significantly influence musical enjoyment.

Reconnecting a pair of Sony MDR-MA900s [*HFN* Oct '12] we plunged – and emotionally it's a deep plunge – into *Elegy For Strings 'In Memoriam Rupert Brooke'* by the wonderfully named Frederick Septimus Kelly [Dutton Digital]. Compositionally simple, this piece relies in large part for its impact on the plaintive string harmonies of its opening theme – a theme which, via the Taurus MkII, was big and noble without losing more than a mere hint of its bittersweet impact.

VERDICT

Auralic intended to create a headphone amp with a particular sonic signature and it has succeeded. Whether you find that sound warm and natural, as Auralic says, or a little soft will rest largely with the partnering headphone.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	25.0V
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	4290mW
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	2.65-1.60ohm
Maximum gain	+18.0dB (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	99.7dB (balanced)
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz/25ohm)	–4.4dB to +0.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 40mW)	0.021-0.00019%
Power consumption	19W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	330x65x230mm / 3.6kg

hi-finews EDITOR'S CHOICE

Battery-powered USB DAC and headphone amplifier
Made by: Oppo Electronics Corp., China
Supplied by: Oppo BD UK Ltd, Norfolk
Telephone: 0845 060 9395
Web: www.oppodigital.co.uk
Price: £259

AUDIO FILE



Oppo HA-2

Oppo's HA-2, the portable version of the brand's inaugural HA-1 headphone amp [*HFN* Sep '14], is designed to partner the PM-3 headphone [p83].

The £259 HA-2 is aimed at the style-conscious market, which is why its leather-clad matt aluminium alloy chassis looks so smart. Combining DAC and headphone amplifier functionality in a smartphone-sized case, it comes with a built-in rechargeable 3000mAh lithium polymer battery good for over six hours of digital music playback.

We liked the rotary volume knob on the top left of the machine, which is easy to operate and has a lovely smooth and positive action, and at 175g it's light enough not to be overly intrusive when you're out and about.

'It digs right into the mix to serve up an animated and involving sound'

The HA-2 has two USBs (Type A and micro B) on the base and two 3.5mm sockets on the top: one of these is the headphone output and the other doubles up as an analogue *input* or a line *output* – so you can hook it up to your hi-fi.

All Oppo products use the ESS Sabre32 DAC chip: the ES9018-K2M version here is specifically for portables, and it supports high-resolution audio playback at up to 384kHz/24-bit PCM and DSD256.

The headphone amplifier stage is Class AB, and you use its 'High' gain setting for low impedance phones, while 'Low' is for more sensitive, higher impedance earbuds. Either can be augmented with the unintrusive bass boost function.

POLISHED DELIVERY

This DAC/headphone amp sounds considerably more expensive than it actually is. Kicking off with well recorded pop, and Scritti Politti's 'Small Talk' [AAC rip – *Cupid And Pysche*, Warner] was highly involving. Bass was decently fluid and had a fair degree of weight, and it moved up to a very spacious and open midband with lots of subtle detailing. The soulful Green Gartside's intonation was also carried well, the HA-2 taking you up close and personal although this was a compressed audio file.

Following this with a 'full fat' uncompressed, 44.1kHz/16-bit CD rip of Steely Dan's 'Black Friday' [*Aja*, MCA Records], the sound took on a good deal more body and life, and the soundstage widened and deepened.

It also became a lot easier to focus on individual items in the mix, with the electric piano work running right through the song holding tight and playing along with the lead instruments and vocal line. Again the HA-2 proved itself to be clear, clean and insightful, able to dig right into the mix and serve up a very animated sound that really involved us.

Aja isn't a brilliantly recorded album – it has a super-dry sound – and the Oppo certainly conveyed this aspect, but didn't let it intrude too much, and the fine handling of the music's dynamic accents meant that we never lost interest. Indeed the music came over as expressive and forceful, just as it should…

Moving to high resolution computer audio, with the Oppo switched to micro USB type-B mode and a recent Apple MacBook Pro deployed, things took a major step forward. That same Steely Dan CD rip – previously played via an iPhone – sounded better still via the computer running Audirvana, the HA-2 appearing to finally be able to stretch its legs.

Moving to a 192kHz/24-bit mastering of REM's 'Texarkana' [*Out Of Time*, Warner] we were delighted by how much cleaner and tighter things sounded. Again, it was very open and decently dimensional, although perhaps it didn't quite show the track's full warmth.

Running the gamut of superlative hi-res recordings, from 'Misty' from Kate Bush's *Fifty Words For Snow* [96kHz/24-bit] to Alex de Grassi's *The Water Garden* [DSD64] again showed the Oppo to be an unerringly detailed performer, punching well above its weight.

ABOVE: The compact matt aluminium case is covered in leather to prevent scratches, but this is not removable. Gain and bass boost controls are located on the side and there is also a highly informative battery condition indicator

VERDICT

One of the best-value headphone amplifiers, the stylish Oppo HA-2 offers a consistently clean, accurate and open sound across a wide variety of digital sources and formats, and does so with élan.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 0dBFs into 47kohm)	3.01V (High Gain)
Max. power output (re. 0dBFs into 25ohm)	173mW (Low)/277mW (High)
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.3-1.4ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBFs / 0dBV)	96.8dB (USB) / 98.1dB (Line)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 10mW)	0.00085–0.065%
Freq. resp. (20kHz/45kHz/90kHz, 25ohm)	+0.1 to –0.0dB/–0.3dB/–0.1dB
Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz)	105dB to 98dB
Digital jitter (24-bit/48kHz)	160psec
Dimensions (WHD)	68x157x12mm

AUDIO FILE

Headphone preamp/USB DAC
Made by: International Audio Group, China
Supplied by: IAG Ltd, Cambs
Telephone: 01480 447700
Web: www.quad-hifi.co.uk; www.internationalaudiogroup.com
Price: £1199

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED



LEFT: Beside the (manual only) volume control are selection toggles for RCA and balanced line ins and Toslink, coaxial and USB digital ins. High and low impedance 'phones are accommodated. Rear RCA outs turn the retro-styled Quad PA-One into a DAC/preamp

Quad PA-One

If you wanted something 'funky', It doesn't get much funkier than this mix of vintage valve sound and archaic styling, but with a full complement of digital inputs.

The PA-One is the best sort of retro, if that's your thing. By virtue of its 'elder Quad' looks alone, like the Quad Vena [*HFN* Jan '15] it will charm even the most jaded audiophile. And Quad is addressing the most powerful trend in home audio: headphones. 'Most high quality headphones never realise their full potential, because they are normally connected to poorly matched amplification', it says.

> 'The Wonders' jangling guitars enjoyed sparkle, clarity and attack'

Quad's 180mm-wide PA-One is *truly* comprehensive. Although it features balanced inputs but not balanced headphone outputs, it accommodates a wide array of digital and analogue sources, including single-ended line-level inputs, along with line-level outputs via RCA phono sockets. For digital, the unit accepts Toslink optical, coaxial and USB.

The valve complement comprises two 6SL7s, two 6SN7s and one EZ81, sufficient for a rated headphone output power of 500mW. Specified across 32-300ohm, there are alternative settings of 'High' for 'phones above 100ohms and 'Low' for below.

The fascia is dominated by a rotary volume control, with Quad's traditional balance slider under it (useful, with 'phones). To the left are two ¼in headphone sockets, a toggle for impedance settings, while three pushbuttons choose the balanced or single-ended line inputs, and 'Digital In' scrolls between digital sources. Tiny LEDs light up for USB, coaxial or optical – the PA-One's USB DAC supports files up to 192kHz/24-bit resolution.

VALVE-Y BASS

None of a range of headphones misbehaved with the PA-One whose bass was deep – truly well-extended – and as tuneful as all those pace/rhythm/timing types worship, but it was also 'valve-y.' We don't have an issue with that, and it certainly didn't undermine the walking sounds on The Four Seasons' 'Walk Like A Man' [Rhino]. More to the point, it didn't affect the weight of the majestic percussion of the Kodo Drummers [Sheffield Lab].

With both Badfinger's *Timeless... The Musical Legacy* [Apple] and other tracks from The Four Seasons, it was interesting to hear how the PA-One separated harmonies in what is the confined space of one's skull. On 'Big Girls Don't Cry', the contrasts between Valli's falsettos and the bass vocals of Nick Massi were emphasised by a slight bloom to the latter that, if possibly artificial, was beneficial.

Turning to the more raucous pop of The Wonders' 'That Thing You Do' [Play-Tone Records], its jangling/soaring guitars enjoyed sparkle and clarity with the requisite attack, while the kick-drum opening from The Band's 'Up On Cripple Creek' [Mobile Fidelity], possessed exactly the dryness we hear off the vinyl.

VERDICT

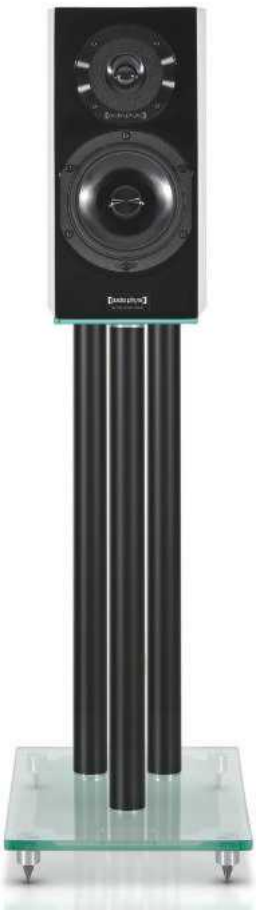
The PA-One is a pugnacious spud of a component, it's chunky and well-made and handsome, and delivers terrific sound: incredible value and eminent usability in a teensy box.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	13.5V (high imp. mode)
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	133mW (low imp. mode)
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz; low/high)	18.8ohm / 70ohm
Maximum gain (low/high)	+21.3dB / +27.6dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	87.1dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz/25ohm)	–0.45dB to –0.40dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 40mW)	0.51-1.1%
Power consumption	38W
Dimensions (WHD)	180x164x285mm

No loss of fine detail

Audio Physic : Music can put a smile on our faces, grab our attention and capture us in its web of expression when, and only when, all artists and all instruments hit the nail on the head and all of the details come together to form a great composition. This can only be achieved when even the tiniest detail makes the perfect contribution towards the overall piece and this is exactly what makes truly great orchestras, groups or individual artists stand out from the crowd.



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Recommended amp power 10-120 W
Impedance 8 Ohm
Frequency range 55 Hz - 33 kHz
Sensitivity 87 dB
(stands not included)



Cardeas plus+

from £22500

Recommended amp power 40-350 W
Impedance 4 Ohm
Frequency range 25 Hz - 40 kHz
Sensitivity 89 dB



Avanti

from £4130

Recommended amp power 30-180 W
Impedance 4 Ohm
Frequency range 31 Hz - 40 kHz
Sensitivity 88 dB

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t:01333 425 999

AUDIO FILE

Balanced headphone preamp/DAC
Made by: Simaudio Ltd, Canada
Supplied by: Renaissance Audio, Scotland
Telephone: 0131 555 3922
Web: www.simaudio.com; www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk
Price: £2700 (£3300 with DAC)

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED



Simaudio Moon Nēo 430HA

Simaudio offers the option of a built-in DAC with the fully-balanced Moon Nēo 430HA, which is priced at £2700 in analogue form, or £3300 with the DAC and a range of digital inputs.

The solid, machined casework has a luxurious feel, and the front panel features Moon's distinctive curved side cheeks – the right-hand one accommodating a comfortably-sized volume knob.

Drawing on developments for Moon's top Evolution series, the volume control system boasts 530 steps in level and a claimed channel matching accuracy of 0.1dB. Similarly, the comprehensively regulated power supply – with a 'virtually unmeasurable' noise floor – sustains a fully-balanced amplifier section using discrete components and offering a rated output of 667mW/600ohm or 8W/50ohm.

User features include high and low gain settings, for 'phones of differing sensitivity, and a switchable crossfeed setting to give a more relaxing 'out of the head' stereo effect on many recordings. The DAC is described as 32-bit, fully asynchronous, and intended to accept virtually any digital source.

The front panel is well populated with control buttons and a standby switch lights up the large display window with an indication of selected input, volume setting and (briefly) sampling frequency. Input selection is via a *pair* of buttons.

The 430HA has two unbalanced analogue inputs and one balanced, with S/PDIF digital inputs including Toslink optical and two coaxial, the latter accepting LPCM audio up to 192kHz/24-bit. A USB port extends sampling rates up to 384kHz and DSD to DSD64, DSD128 and 'quad-speed' DSD256.

There's a 6.35mm headphone fascia socket output and a 3.5mm mini-jack socket *input*, while the 430HA also has concealed balanced headphone outputs: two three-pin XLRs and a single four-pin XLR socket. A compact remote duplicates all the fascia functions.

> 'The Art Pepper "hole in the middle" effect was successfully removed'

Apart from the rear analogue and digital inputs there are connections for Simlink system control, a 12V trigger input and output for remote operation, and an RS-232 port to facilitate firmware updates.

CLEAN AND CLEAR

Listening first via analogue inputs, we were soon won over. The treble was clear and clean, not sparkling in any exaggerated way, but allowing you to enjoy enticing musical nuances. The treble blended seamlessly into a neutral midrange that again seemed to foster musical communication. The bass end was clean and unfettered, so that acoustic bass instruments appeared to breathe with a natural presence.

ABOVE:
Along with comprehensive controls, the front panel offers a ¼in headphone socket, plus balanced XLR output connectors revealed by sliding back the display panel

To listen to 'Snow' from Patricia Barber's *The Cole Porter Mix* [Blue Note] was to hear a familiar track coming up fresh in new sonic glories. There was a depth and sonority to the piano sound that exceeded anything we'd heard before on 'phones and it retained every bit of its character when guitar, bass and drums came in.

Moon's crossfeed facility had the effect here of flattening the stereo image behind or over your head and reducing its lateral spread. The 'hole in the middle' effect with *Art Pepper Meets The Rhythm Section*, recorded in 1957, was successfully removed. So this is a useful option.

With the title track from Eric Bibb's *Get Onboard* [Telarc], bass and drums had a lightness and bounce that really had our feet tapping. Glen Scott's organ phrases shone through to perfection and even tiny elements in the mix were clearly delineated.

After this, we tried the 430HA's built-in DAC. With 'Get Onboard' the sound was still excellent – a big, expansive sound – but it didn't seem to have quite the last bit of foot-tapping life and bounce that we expected. High-res downloads included the RPO's Mozart Wind Serenades and cellist Tim Hugh's recording *Hands On Heart*, both from Naim. The wind music was appealingly clear-toned yet forceful, and Hugh's account of the Kodály Sonata was gripping.

VERDICT

The 430HA offers useful facilities, balanced operation and great sound. It ensures the music comes through with freedom and aplomb while its USB DAC option only bolsters its desirability.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (re. 1% THD into 47kohm)	12.5V
Max. power output (re. 1% THD into 25ohm)	4208mW
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.10-1.18ohm
Maximum gain (High/Low setting)	+16.1dB/+10.1dB (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	97.8dB (balanced)
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz/25ohm)	–0.0dB to +0.1dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 40mW)	0.0018-0.00012%
Power consumption	22W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	429x89x351mm / 9kg

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Open-back circumaural dynamic headphone
Made by: AKG Acoustics GmbH
Supplied by: Sound Technology Ltd
Telephone: 01462 480000
Web: www.akg.com; www.soundtech.co.uk
Price: £1099

AUDIO FILE

AKG K812



ABOVE: AKG's D-shaped earpad opening is a novelty, designed to improve bass sealing around the critical jaw line beneath the ear. It works effectively and remains comfortable over long periods

This is a £1099 over-head, open-back, dynamic design that makes no pretence to being suited to use on the move. To wit: it has a long, 3m lead which does not include a mic/remote for use with compatible handheld music sources, its capsules do not rotate flat or fold up into the headband and it is not supplied with a carrying case – although there is an omega-shaped plywood headphone stand provided.

Although the K812 is conventional-looking it nevertheless remains distinctly 'AKG'. Styling cues from earlier K-series models, particularly the circular capsules, conical perforated rear enclosure and circumferential trim ring, have been retained.

Most significant of the changes, though, has been to AKG's 'Sound Sealing' earpads. The velour-covered circular items of old give way to (faux?) leather-finished earpads that are more D-shaped at their opening. We found them very comfortable, aided by the K812's modest head clamping force. A gimbal bearing allows each capsule to rotate horizontally and vertically for best fit.

Other features of note are that the K812 incorporates a new 53mm diameter drive unit with a voice coil wound from copper-clad aluminium wire, to save on moving mass, and fitted with 'the strongest magnet system available on the market', says AKG. Nevertheless, its sensitivity is towards the lower end of what modern high-quality headphones typically deliver.

> 'We were captivated by the bell-like purity of Emma Kirkby's voice'

POWER OF ANALYSIS

Overall, we liked these, not least because it puts the old AKG fuzziness of sound firmly in the past. The K812 sounds much more open, much more transparent and informative than its forebears.

On every track we consider to be notably testing of bass quality the K812 delivered clean, 'fast' LF at replay volumes up to the loudest one would care to tolerate. That said, there's a peak at around 6kHz in the diffuse-field corrected response, and unevenness in the impedance versus frequency trace between 2kHz and 5kHz that suggests the presence of resonances.

This means that any potential purchaser should listen before buying. But our Teac HA-501 headphone amp [*HFN* Apr '14] suited the K812 well – any treble forwardness didn't prevent us from enjoying the AKG's strengths, particularly its neutral tonal balance and its powers of analysis.

With 'You Look Good To Me' from The Oscar Peterson Trio's 1964 album *We Get Requests* [an 88.2kHz/24-bit rip from the Analogue Productions/Verve SACD] we thought the K812 did a very fine job of rendering Ray Brown's double-bass, strings bowed *and* plucked.

We also tested Jennifer Warnes' *The Hunter* [Private Music], Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* [HDtracks], 'The Saga Of Harrison Crabfeathers' from Brian Blomberg's *Wood* [A440 Records] and 'Limit To Your Love' from the eponymous James Blake album [Atlas Records]. Any headphone that can handle all these with equanimity is doing very nicely, thank you, and the K812 delivered exactly that.

As for the K812's treble, it didn't bother us overly and we certainly didn't find sibilants a problem with Emma Kirkby singing the moving 'Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies,' ripped from the BIS SACD *Musique And Sweet Poetrie*. Rather, we were captivated by the K812's fine portrayal of the reverberant church acoustic and its faithful rendition of the bell-like purity of Kirkby's familiar voice.

VERDICT

The K812 marks a sea change for AKG, largely retaining the tonal neutrality of earlier K-series models but consigning their frustrating opacity to the trashcan of history. We found the K812 a thoroughly engaging and informative design.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	109.6dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	39.1ohm @ 6.2kHz 51.2ohm @ 81Hz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±6.7dB
LF extension (–6dB ref. 200Hz)	11Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	0.2% / 0.1%
Weight (inc cable and 0.25in connector)	456g

AUDIO FILE

Open-backed planar magnetic circumaural headphone
Made by: Audeze LLC, California, USA
Supplied by: Computers Unlimited, London
Telephone: 0208 200 8282
Web: www.audeze.com; www.unlimited.com
Price: £599

hi-finews HIGHLY COMMENDED

Audeze EL-8 (open-back)

Thanks to some industrial design by Designworks, a spin-off of BMW which has one of its three studios in LA, the £599 EL-8 is as sleek and modern looking as its predecessors were chic-free and clumsily retro. The only visual element linking the two is the wood finish encircling the EL-8's capsules. It's a large headphone and a heavy one too – though lighter than the LCD3 [*HFN* May '14] – but it wears a well-tailored suit in place of dungarees.

The advent of rare earth neodymium-iron-boron magnets and the ability to optimise magnetic design using finite element techniques have enabled Audeze to create a series of planar magnetic headphones having broadly comparable sensitivity to their moving-coil competitors.

The need for all that magnetic material does of course mean extra weight (530g with cable), but everything has been done to make the EL-8 as comfortable as possible – large and soft circumaural earpads plus a well-upholstered headband.

Audeze says that the EL-8 'works beautifully with smartphones, tablets and portable players', which should not be taken to mean that the EL-8 is a natural candidate for use on the hoof. Yes, the capsules fold flat, the 2.0m mini-jack terminated Y-cable is short enough, and there's a drawstring carrying pouch provided.

Plus there are balanced cable options available for use with the Astell&Kern or Pono personal players and Sony's PHA-3 portable headphone amplifier, or a cable equipped with an inline remote control for Apple iOS devices. But the EL-8 is essentially too big for most users to consider using it on the move.

SUMPTUOUS

The EL-8 may look a whole lot different from its ancestors, and cost a whole lot less into the bargain, but in its fundamentals its sound quality is much the same. In other words, its tonal balance errs on the side of warm sophistication rather than balls-out clarity.

In fact up to 1kHz the EL-8 is as near tonally neutral as makes no difference. Above that, though, it becomes reticent – although many listeners will adore a 'one pace back' presentation that never sounds harsh or hard unless the source material is truly grim.

We found the EL-8 to sound most at home on simple vocal material, where its warm tonal cast can make for an attractive sumptuousness, and on material with clean and well-extended bass – an area of the audio spectrum where the EL-8 unquestionably shines. It coped almost disdainfully with all our favourite bass test tracks, delivering deep, low distortion, tuneful LF. Mercifully stripped of room effects, it gave the lie to the new headphone response target functions with their shelved-up bass. We don't need that, folks!

> 'The EL-8 coped quite disdainfully with all our favourite bass test tracks'

On the vocal front, 'Songbird' from Eva Cassidy's *Simply Eva* [Blix Street Records] – an over-EQ'd recording that strays into harshness – benefited from the EL-8's emollient touch, while Emma Kirkby's haunting 'Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies' [88.2kHz/24-bit rip, *Musique And Sweet Poetrie* – BIS], while notched back in respect of presence, conveyed the bell-like clarity of the divine Emma's voice with very well controlled sibilants.



ABOVE: The EL-8 in open-back form is not a makeover of previous Audezes so much as a clean-sheet, ground-up reassessment of how a modern headphone should look

VERDICT

Audeze continues to plough a consistent tonal furrow that gives the EL-8 a specific appeal. If you dislike bright sound and don't mind reproduction that is just a little slugged tonally and dynamically, the EL-8 will surely delight you.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	115.2dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	31.2ohm @ 12.2kHz 31.8ohm @ 4.2kHz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±9.2dB
LF extension (–6dB ref. 200Hz)	7Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	<0.1% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable)	530g



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AUDIO FILE

Dynamic, semi-open back circumaural headphone
Made by: AudioQuest, California
Supplied by: Audioquest UK
Telephone: 01249 848 873
Web: www.audioquest.com
Price: £499

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

AudioQuest NightHawk



You can divide headphones into travel models and those for use in the home, but by virtue of its bulk – and despite its lightness and sensitivity – AudioQuest's new £499 NightHawk falls firmly into the 'home' category.

Unlike equally sizeable models which fold flat to make them flight-bag-friendly, the NightHawk's cups don't swivel out of the way, while the carry case is the size of some pieces of hand luggage we've seen.

But that means nothing if you want headphones solely for purist listening via a high-end system. They are clearly 'voiced' by audiophiles, and they can hold their own against models selling for thrice the price.

And the NightHawk boasts so much novel thinking and innovation that one must marvel at it, even if its drivers are moving-coil rather than the more radical flat diaphragm types which are increasing in popularity.

It's the details that make the NightHawk so fascinating. The most talked-about aspects are the use of 3D printing and the unusual material for the earpiece. AudioQuest says the 3D 'biomimetic grille' was inspired by the underlying structure of butterfly wings – 'a complex diamond-cubic latticework to diffuse sound and defeat resonances'.

> 'The "3D grille" was inspired by the structure of a butterfly's wing'

As for the headband, there is little that's rigid about the NightHawk's suspension. Even the cups connect to the framework with rubber bands and move with one's head. The resultant experience is a miraculous marriage of a snug fit with no sense of pressure – thanks, too, to the upper headband itself, which is a curved metal rod encased in fabric, while the circumaural cushions are covered with a 'protein leather' which allows one's ears to breathe.

Inside each cup is a 50mm 'pistonic' driver with a biocellulose diaphragm and a patented split-gap motor designed to reduce intermodulation distortion. The actual earcups are made from injection moulded 'Liquid Wood' – a heat-treated wood/plant fibre mix.

SPOOKY!

The NightHawk comes with two 8ft cables – a thin one with a 3.5mm jack and a heavier cable fitted with a 6.35mm plug – and these sounded different, the heavier cable seeming more open.

We began with *Nils Lofgren – Face The Music* [Fantasy]. On 'Two By Two' the sound positively sparkled, but there was a distinct softening at the extremes. Were these 'phones voiced to match the high comfort factor, to encourage long listening sessions? At no point did sibilance intrude, and even the twangiest playing of 'Cry Tough' managed the trick of ferocious attack without aggression.

With 'Bad Things', the raunchy theme from *True Blood* (via download), things got a bit muddy, but the roiling, turbid bass had fabulous mass and depth. These headphones have no problem whatsoever conveying the majesty of a full-range recording heard through a pedigree amp.

Twelve seconds into 'Come And Get It', on *Let Us In Americana: The Music Of Paul McCartney* [Reviver Records], a disembodied voice spoke so out of the head that it sounded as if someone had come into the room!

ABOVE: Headband is minimalist and therefore very light, with a sub-strap resting on the head to support its 346g weight. Note the rubber-suspended earpiece

VERDICT

AudioQuest's NightHawk blends a sane-ish price, wonderful construction, truly lush comfort and, above all, delightful sound with no fatigue-inducing quirks. Openness, bass extension, detail and a sense of space are all part of the package, and it looks 'cool'.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	110.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	26.1ohm @ 25Hz 27.0ohm @ 20kHz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±7.6dB
LF extension (–6dB ref. 200Hz)	<10Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	<0.1% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable)	354g

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

Closed-back, circumaural headphone
Made by: Furutech Co. Ltd, Tokyo, Japan
Supplied by: Sound Fowndations, Berks
Telephone: 0118 981 4238
Web: www.adl-av.com; www.soundfowndations.co.uk
Price: £295

AUDIO FILE

Furutech ADL H128

In most respects the H128 is a pretty conventional closed-back headphone but it does depart from the norm in the shaping of its capsules and earpads. ADL calls them 'Alpha Triform Contour Earcups' – its way of saying that the cavity for your ears is triangular rather than rectangular or circular.

This does improve the earpads' seal to the head, assuring a more consistent bass response, while the lack of parallel surfaces reduces standing waves within the volumes of air enclosed by each capsule. However, the H128's capsules could hardly be called capacious and its head clamping force is rather on the high side – not all will find them ideally comfortable to wear.

It comes with a short (1.3m) as well as a long (3.0m) connecting cable and a zip-up hard-shell carrying case. To accommodate the two different-length cables ADL has used mini-XLR connectors to join these to the left capsule.

Within each capsule is a 40mm driver featuring a diaphragm formed from PEEK (a robust semicrystalline thermoplastic), a neodymium magnet system and copper-coated aluminium wire in the voice coil to reduce moving mass. Three external colour options are available – silver/black, silver/brown or dark blue.

'The big-boned beauty of Beethoven's music really shone through'

INFORMATIVE LISTEN

Both the test measurements and the listening show that ADL has chosen the now popular boosted bass route. This is moderate but it nevertheless gives a distinct cast to the H128's sound. If you accept its tonal weighting towards LF, there's a lot to like about the H128 as it will give an informative and enjoyable account of the music.

Listening a 44.1kHz/16-bit version of the third movement of Mozart's Divertimento in E-flat, K375, from the SCO Wind Soloists [Linn Records], we looked for the key requisites of delicacy and fidelity of instrumental timbres. While the H128 fattened the textures marginally and didn't *quite* have the 'air' to render the full expanse of the recording acoustic, the skill and enjoyment that the SCO soloists bring to this programme remained abundantly obvious.

If you are a DSD aficionado you will probably know about Native DSD (*www.nativedsd.com*). Some of the tracks are offered in DSD64, DSD128, DSD256 and DXD format, allowing for some interesting comparisons, and multichannel versions are available as well as stereo. We particularly recommend the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' movement from Beethoven's String Quartet Op.132, played by a Boston string orchestra [*Dreams & Prayers*, Crier Records], which is available in both DSD64 and DSD128 formats. There's also a binaural version yet we find the standard stereo version to sound *significantly* more spacious replayed over these headphones!

This recording is extraordinary and (even if you convert the DSF files to 88.2kHz/24-bit PCM as we did) the difference between the DSD64 and DSD128 versions is plainly audible, in favour of the latter, as you'd suppose. What makes this recording so special is the gargantuan size and sheer presence of the stereo image.

It's a challenge to which the H128 stood up well. The big-boned beauty of both the music and the recording really shone through. Once the track had started playing it would have been a wrench to stop it prematurely.



ABOVE: The most notable feature of the H128 is its triangular-shaped capsules, intended to improve the seal of the earpads to the head and suppress internal resonances. Three colour options are available

VERDICT

The H128 merits adding to the shortlist of anyone looking for a standout £300 model. Its bass is shelved up, but not so much as to obscure its inherent resolution and musicality, qualities which make it enjoyable across a wide range of programme genres.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	115.0dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	71.6ohm @ 20Hz 83.7ohm @ 76Hz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±4.5dB
LF extension (–6dB ref. 200Hz)	19Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	1.3% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable)	336g

AUDIO FILE

Closed-back, circumaural planar magnetic headphone
Made by: Oppo Electronics Corp., China
Supplied by: Oppo Digital UK Ltd
Telephone: 0845 060 9395
Web: www.oppo-bluray.co.uk
Price: £349

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Oppo PM-3

Spinning off technology from flagship products to more affordable cousins is an old tradition in audio which Oppo has quickly adopted with its expanding range of planar magnetic headphones. After the PM-1 [*HFN* Jul '14] and less costly PM-2 [*HFN* Feb '15] comes the yet cheaper PM-3. But at £349 it is notable for a good deal more than its friendlier price tag, or that it's closed-back where the PM-1 and PM-2 were open-back.

What Oppo doesn't make crystal clear is that it embodies a significantly different frequency response, and hence tonal balance, from that of its forebears. There's a hump in output centred on 150Hz, while it is also significantly more energetic in the critical presence band region around 3kHz, and further up the treble band too.

The PM-3's closed back provides the higher degree of sound isolation often necessary when listening on the move, and it's well sealed. Oppo has also made the PM-3 lighter and smaller, although it is still on the bulky side and the zip-up carrying case is large for most pockets.

To make the capsules smaller, Oppo has developed a new, 55mm circular variant of its planar magnetic drive unit. The same seven-layer diaphragm construction is used, as is the double-sided spiral 'voice coil'. Despite this smaller driver the PM-3 retains much the same sensitivity as before but has a slightly decreased impedance.

> 'The Oppo PM-3 is well capable of delivering true low bass fundamentals'

And with its soft earpads, well-padded headband, medium mass and modest capsule clamping force, the PM-3 should feel comfortable to most people. Unusually, no fewer than four connecting cables are provided (one 3m, three 1.2m), all of which plug into the left capsule. One is a straight cable with no inline remote, the second has an iOS-compatible remote and the third an Android-compatible remote.

TOUCH OF EXCITEMENT

The PM-1 continued what had already become established as the trademark tonal balance of PM designs by Audeze – it sounded deliciously smooth and warm but perhaps not as directly informative as the very best headphones with a subjectively more even tonality. Sonically the PM-2 was more of the same…

The PM-3 may still have a warmer than neutral tonal balance (to our ears) but, as the measured frequency responses confirm, it sounds significantly different, principally because the vital presence band region is no longer so obviously denuded. That 'touch of excitement', to which Oppo's PM-3 press release alluded, is to be found right here, and its third 'phones iteration is not just different but better.

Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Grazioso!* [Resonus Classics] is, as the notes put it, 'highly energetic and there are few lyrical moments'. Its shrieking piccolo alone sets nerve endings a-tingle, appropriately for a piece inspired by the works of Led Zeppelin. For it to have its full stimulating effect it's vital that the instrumental timbres are not homogenised and that the well-defined, open acoustic is allowed to play its full part too. And while Oppo's latest offering was less than outstanding in providing the necessary separation – and therefore the intended impact of this piece – it didn't do a bad job.

We played two favourite bass test tracks – Jennifer Warnes' 'Somewhere, Somebody' [*The Hunter*, Private Music] and Béla Fleck And The Flecktones' *The Flight Of The Cosmic Hippo* [Warner] – and concluded that, if the PM-3's bass is just a little 'fat', it is also well capable of delivering true low bass fundamentals. It's a combination many will relish and a far better compromise than that offered by many modern headphones with a similarly shelved-up bass.



ABOVE: The PM-3's closed-back capsules have a new circular version of Oppo's high-sensitivity planar magnetic drive units. Four connecting leads will ensure broad compatibility for use at home and on the hoof

VERDICT

If you've found the PM-1 and PM-2 slightly lacking in verve then this younger sibling is likely to be much more to your taste. So its lower cost is just icing on the cake.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1kHz for 1Vrms input)	114.0dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	24.9ohm @ 358Hz 25.9ohm @ 20kHz
Capsule matching (40Hz-10kHz)	±3.0dB
LF extension (–6dB ref. 200Hz)	<10Hz
Distortion 100Hz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL)	<0.1% / <0.1%
Weight (inc cable)	352g

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

Two-way reflex-loaded standmount loudspeaker
Made by: B&W Group Ltd, West Sussex
Supplied by: B&W Group Ltd
Telephone: 0800 232 1513
Web: www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk
Price: £1499 (stands £399)

AUDIO FILE

B&W CM6 S2

Bowers and Wilkins' £1499 CM6 S2 draws on the technology of models in the more rarified strata of the Worthing company's catalogue. It comes in a choice of black, white or rosenut finishes, and there's a dedicated 56cm stand, price £400, to which the speakers are bolted.

This is in silver or black to match the various speaker finishes, and has a central column divided for mass-loading and to provide a cable-management channel. (We used 15kg of Atabites filling material from Atacama for stand loading.)

Familiar features include the yellow woven Kevlar cone of the 165mm mid/bass driver, the Flowport dimpling of the rear-venting port and the use of a tapered Nautilus tube behind the 25mm aluminium-dome tweeter to dissipate unwanted rear radiation. As seen in the photo, this is mounted in a decoupled pod atop the main cabinet – a design element derived from the 800 Diamonds.

The mid/bass driver fixings are concealed by flush trim-rings, while the tweeter has a fixed metal mesh protector (a tool is provided to remove this should the user wish to). The main speaker grille, grey in the case of the satin white finish, has hidden magnetic fixings, leaving a clean front baffle when removed.

As suggested by B&W, we placed the speakers some 3m apart, around 70cm out from the rear wall and the better part of a metre from side walls, and we opted for a slight toe-in toward the listening position.

AN EXPLICIT VIEW

This is a design not built to impress with hi-fi fireworks straight out of the box, but to grow on the listener over a familiarisation period, during which the appreciation of its combination of transparency and refinement increases.

On Claire Martin's new *Time And Place* [Linn Records], she's backed by the Montpellier Cello Quartet, and the snap and drive of the tango-infused take on Bowie's 'The Man Who Sold The World' showed both the ability of the speakers with intertwining instruments – in the form of big fiddles both bowed and pizzicato – and the way they can focus a solo voice and bring out its true character.

These new B&W standmount speakers can certainly make a statement, and not just a visual one, but in the way they get their teeth into a wide range of music. The growling bass-lines, beautifully-realised instrumentation and characteristic tones of Leonard Cohen on his *Popular Problems* album [Columbia] were rendered by the B&Ws with every detail intact. With voice very much centre front, the speakers gave the accompanying instruments plenty of space to snake around behind the vocals.

> 'Instruments were kept in focus even in the more Spectorish arrangements'

Similarly with the breezy pop of Nick Lowe's *Jesus Of Cool* [Proper Records] the B&Ws' combination of speed and definition was attractive, keeping instruments in focus even in the more Spectorish arrangements.

So these B&Ws manage to be analytical as well as highly musical, even crashing out The Clash's *London Calling* [Sony 2-89056] with more than reasonable conviction. What was lost in absolute low-end slam would, for many listeners, be more than compensated for by their speed and dexterity.

VERDICT

B&W's CM6 S2 speakers offer an attractive mix of refinement in the upper vocal and presence bands and airiness in the extreme treble, enabling them to convey a good sense of space and ambience with the right recording. The extra for stands is also money well-spent.



ABOVE: The bi-wirable CM6 S2 uses the familiar B&W Kevlar-coned mid/bass driver, but mounts the tweeter in a pod, compliantly attached to the top of the main cabinet

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	88.8dB/87.3dB/86.6dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.7ohm @ 19.7kHz 53.6ohm @ 29Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–60° @ 3.8kHz 60° @ 24Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.2dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	52Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 0.7% / <0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	403x200x301mm

AUDIO FILE

Two-way standmount loudspeaker
Made by: International Audio Holding, The Netherlands
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.crystalcable.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £9998

hi-finews HIGHLY COMMENDED

Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo

Derived from the dearer Arabesque Mini, the £9998-per-pair Minissimo is Crystal Cable's most populist take yet on its highly original speaker shape. The price includes integral pedestals, which are fixed at the factory – making these small monitors for standmount use only.

The original idea was to create a speaker with 'continuously curved walls'. Unlike its dearer siblings' multi-part construction this charming little beauty is actually milled from a single piece of 'metal loaded polymer material'. The result is a true monocoque enclosure noteworthy for its sublime finish.

> 'The bongos were so vivid that we looked up in a moment of confusion'

Yes, the Minissimo is a non-resonant, robust work of art that oozes luxury. Even the three-legged integral pedestal is a carefully-devised stand, with the cylindrical supports arranged to follow the profile in three diameters and create a further visual treat.

Add to that a choice of colours using automotive paint – the review pair was in Solar Orange, but you can opt for Aquamarine Blue or Pearl White – and you have aesthetics that are hard to fault.

Crystal Cable also found that, in addition to simplifying the construction, the new material and manufacturing methodology allowed it to exercise even greater control over the curvature of the walls as well as their thickness. This, in turn, allowed optimisation of the structure's resonant behaviour and determining the internal volume with greater precision.

Crystal Cable fits this enclosure with the same 25mm tweeter and 150mm woofer used in the Arabesque Mini, addressed by a 'new topology' crossover. We measured a minimum 7.2ohm impedance and the speaker seemed easy to drive.

WALL TO WALL ARRAY

We found the SACD of the Grateful Dead's *American Beauty* [Mobile Fidelity] inescapably involving. Stage width was almost deliriously broad, a wall-to-wall experience that placed the musicians across the room in an array free of 'holes' between the players.

The Minissimo's seamlessness was evident in airiness and textures of unimpeachable uniformity. Listening to *Simon & Garfunkel: The Complete Albums Collection* [Columbia Legacy], we were struck by the sheer naturalness of the bass. The bongos stage-left on 'Patterns' were so vivid that we looked up more than once in a moment of confusion between reality and reproduction.

Then there was the exquisite detail retrieval. There was nothing hygienic about this abundance of information, with everything kept in proportion. But so clear and clean was the playback that subtleties were always easily discernible.

VERDICT

The audiophile world is not short of sublime, small two-ways with big price tags. But the Minissimos combine so many virtues – sweet sound, ease of use, gorgeous looks – that it's impossible not to smile when you see and hear them.



RIGHT: Machined-from-solid cabinet has seamless surfaces and a flawless finish. Its downward-firing port allows great siting options, irrespective of proximity to rear walls, while the superb WBT silver terminals accept spades, bananas or bare speaker cables

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	80.1dB/81.0dB/80.7dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	7.2ohm @ 47Hz 74ohm @ 86Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–61° @ 96Hz 55° @ 23Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.0dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	43Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.4% / 0.2% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD, inc. stand)	960x300x250mm

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AUDIO FILE

Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Made by: Dynaudio A/S, Denmark
Supplied by: Dynaudio International, UK
Telephone: 01353 721089
Web: www.dynaudio.com
Price: £58,500

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Dynaudio Evidence Platinum

This new Platinum model (£58,500) is the latest design statement in the Evidence series. In essence it's a heavily turbocharged Temptation, with Dynaudio's latest drive unit and accompanying crossover designs. Its form factor is almost the same: a 'totem pole' of a monitor that nonetheless won't dominate a room.

Its enclosure is immaculately finished in piano lacquered real wood veneers with a choice of black, mocca, rosewood and Bordeaux finishes.

All the rigorously matched drivers are laid out vertically as symmetrical pairs. Dynaudio endeavours to control vertical dispersion to make its speakers less influenced by the room and less critical of positioning. The company eschews bi- or tri-wiring.

> 'We were struck by the uncommonly vivid and uncoloured presentation

The Platinum has the latest 28mm Esotar² tweeters – coated, silk domed units, with aluminium voice coils suspended in ferrofluid and a rear damping chamber acting as an acoustic absorber. The two 150mm midrange drivers have diaphragms made from a magnesium silicate polymer (MSP), a composite boasting low mass/high rigidity and 'ideal internal damping properties', says Dynaudio.

The cones' one-piece moulding has been geometrically optimised so that its dispersion pattern adapts as frequency and amplitude increases. Their motor assemblies feature neodymium magnets and large voice coils made of lightweight aluminium wire rather than copper. The four 180mm bass units are also MSP designs.

The woofers are in heavily braced and damped reflex enclosures with large rear ports. The sculpted centre section of the Platinum containing the tweeters and midrange drivers is in a CNC-machined aluminium structure which also houses the crossover network.

AN EXPLICIT PICTURE

From the opening bars of the evergreen 'Private Investigations' from Dire Straits' *Love Over Gold* [Mercury] we were struck by the Dynaudio's uncommonly vivid and subjectively clean and uncoloured presentation. Bass is taut and explicit, the midrange clear, and high frequencies crisp and open, with little evidence of any 'sizzle'.

You *might* think the Platinum speaker rather dry at first, but the longer we listened the more we came to appreciate its three-dimensional imaging and its complete lack of coloration.

The speaker is wonderful, for example, at reproducing the sound of a piano, with life-like scale and dynamics, the attack and decay of notes reproduced with fabulous precision and clarity.

The insightful midband and its excellent tweeters seem to combine just the right amount of vibrancy and sparkle. And it packs a muscular wallop when the music warrants it. However, while the speaker might remain civil and easy to listen to for most of the time it's not afraid to portray the unvarnished truth with poorer material!

VERDICT

This is an extraordinarily fine speaker that sounds simply right with all manner of music. Its analytical 'matter-of-factness' is skilfully combined with an enjoyable musicality that obviates listening fatigue. It's a world-class design.



RIGHT: **Dynaudio's latest flagship model stands almost 2m tall. The top and bottom woofer enclosures are reflex loaded with large ports while an aluminium centre section contains the speaker's network in a chamber behind the tweeters and midrange units**

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	90.5dB/89.5dB/89.1dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.2ohm @ 99Hz 7.4ohm @ 20kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–30° @ 21Hz 21° @ 310Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	±0.5dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 150Hz/10kHz)	42Hz / 29.9kHz/28.1kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.2% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1940x210x510mm

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AUDIO FILE

Floorstanding three-way loudspeaker
Manufactured by: Focal-JMlab, France
Supplied by: Focal-JMlab UK Ltd, Salisbury
Telephone: 0845 660 2680
Web: www.focal.com
Price: £9599

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Focal Sopra N°2

Styling of the distinctive £9599/pr Sopra N°2 floorstander is clearly derived from Alain Pineau's work on its bigger brothers. Yet it's hardly tiny, at 1.2m tall, and nor indeed is it a lightweight, at a substantial 55kg. You can celebrate the shape of that curvaceous cabinet in a choice of Carrara White, Imperial Red or Electric Orange automotive quality lacquers, also in all black or in walnut/black.

It's a three-way design, with a pair of 18cm woofers handing over to a 16.5cm midrange at around 250Hz, and one of Focal's familiar beryllium inverted-dome tweeters taking up the baton at 2.2kHz.

The midrange is mounted above the tweeter in its own upper housing, separated from the main enclosure by the wedge-shaped tweeter section which Focal describes as offering 'Infinite Horn Loading'. The enclosure for the bass drivers also extends to part of this upper section via two vents that pass through the treble IHL wedge.

'These speakers ensure you are listening *through* them, and not *to* them'

Focal's patented IHL design is one of several Focal innovations here – it is perhaps sometimes overlooked that its base in Saint-Étienne is also the hub for a lot of theoretical research and practical development, meaning that just about every new Focal speaker range arrives bristling with fresh in-house technology.

Thus the familiar Focal W-cone drivers, so-called because they use two layers of glass-fibre either side of a filler to create a sandwich (hence 'double verre' or 'double-V') are used here, with the addition of a new Tuned Mass Damper in the surround to better manage resonances. Focal says its inspiration was the suspension of Formula 1 cars – Renault, of course!

It's the same thinking that informs the use of a new 'Neutral Inductance Circuit' in the drive-units' motors. NIC aims to maintain a stable magnetic field, and thus reduce distortions.

MAGICAL IMAGING

After careful set-up, it was clear that these Sopra speakers are capable of power, punch, refinement and a quite magical sense of stereo solidity and image focus.

They delivered a lovely, spacious presentation of Supertramp's *Crime Of The Century* [A&M] in 192kHz/24-bit, with good ambience and focus on the voices of the title track. But things really took off when playing the histrionics of Muse's 'The Handler', in 96kHz/24-bit guise from *Drones* [Warner], the thundering bass line delivered in particularly thrilling fashion and with plenty of snarl and attack.

Queen's 'Keep Yourself Alive', in DSD from the SACD [Universal Japan], had the chugging guitar-line much in evidence, and Freddie Mercury's voice delivered with excellent clarity. Roger Taylor's drum solo was tight and powerful, and the soaring Brian May guitar delivered with its characteristic tonality singing out of the mix.

What these speakers do so well is make instruments sound real and unforced, ensuring you are soon listening *through* them, not *to* them. This was especially apparent with Lake Street Dive's version of 'I Want You Back' [*Fun Machine* – Signature Sounds], where the jaw-dropping voice of lead singer Rachael Price just hung in space, pretty well defining the term 'in the room presence'.

VERDICT

The Sopra N°2 is one of Focal's best designs to date. It offers an explicit, involving sound with stereo imaging and soundstaging bordering on the magical with the speakers set up and 'dialled in' to suit your room.



ABOVE: The Sopra N°2 has much of the style of the Utopias with the twin 18cm bass units in the lower cabinet, and the 16.5cm midrange above the beryllium-domed tweeter

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	88.7dB/88.2dB/87.9dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.6ohm @ 104Hz 46.2ohm @ 20Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–72° @ 56Hz 45° @ 900Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.1dB
Frequency response error (200Hz–20kHz)	±3.4dB / ±3.5dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	37Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
Dimensions (HWD)	1190x358x540mm

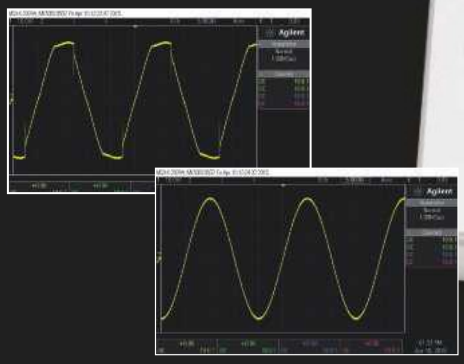
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AUDIO FILE

Floorstanding three-way reflex-loaded loudspeaker
Made by: GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd, Maidstone, Kent
Supplied by: GP Acoustics (UK) Ltd
Telephone: 01622 672 261
Web: www.kef.com
Price: £16,000-£18,000 (depending on finish)

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

KEF Blade Two

The slim, curvy shape of the original KEF Blade is replicated in the smaller Two reviewed here. Priced at a more accessible £16k in black, white, red, grey and metallic silver, it also comes in special 'Kent Edition' finishes at a premium.

Seen from the front, the Blade Two belies its size and weight, with the only drive unit visible the Uni-Q mid/treble unit, centred eyeball-like in an elliptical apron of soft black rubber material. Four bass units sit behind, two on each cabinet side.

KEF first introduced this special driver configuration in 2009 with its Concept Blade, 'the world's first single apparent source loudspeaker'. The tapered cabinet shape allows the drive units to be located up around ear-height, and it is moulded as a two-part shell made from a special glass fibre-loaded plastic composite.

'Philly Joe's cymbals were as sparky as ever, but weren't over-emphasised'

The mid/treble unit with its newest tangerine guide and a deeper dome tweeter shape is the latest variant on a design dating back to the Muon Flagship [*HFN* May '08], while the four 165mm bass units have a vented space between voice coil and diaphragm and a decoupling element that allows the use of a lower-order filter. Each pair operates into its own damped section of the enclosure volume, with a curved internal port tube leading to a flared rear vent.

BODY AND DRIVE

It's quite hard to sum up the Blade Two's sonic character, since it is so neutral. The treble is smooth and unexaggerated, so it does not throw detail in your face, and yet all the detail is there. It offers excellent stereo imaging, while the bass is clean, even and quick, and seemingly goes deep enough to deal with anything that a recording engineer might throw its way.

A track with really weighty bass, 'Mary Magdelene' from Me'Shell Ndegeocello's *Peace Beyond Passion* [Reprise Records], sounded engagingly layered while the bass was well-controlled. On the classic 'Easy Money' from *Rickie Lee Jones* [Warner], jazzman Red Callender's string-bass intro was reproduced with absolutely even weight, and with that rock-solid certainty that comes from a response extending well below the lowest fundamental.

With the 'left/right' early stereo *Art Pepper Meets The Rhythm Section* [Contemporary], Pepper's alto sax was placed hard over the left while the rhythm section was grouped somewhere behind the right speaker. With the Blade Twos the matchless double-bass of Paul Chambers had tremendous body and drive, each note in the low register seeming to move air without any hint of sluggishness.

The sound here also exemplified the Blade Two's slightly laid-back treble quality. You might have thought at first that Philly Joe's cymbals could have had more sparkle. But it quickly became clear that while those cymbals were as sparky as ever, they just weren't over-emphasised.

And with the reunion version of 'Hotel California', from The Eagles' *Hell Freezes Over* [Warner] the Blade Two was truly luxuriant. The bass end was warm, generous and powerful with truly satisfying depth, yet quick and rhythmically convincing. That huge soundstage populated by multiple guitars was as impressive as we've ever heard it.

VERDICT

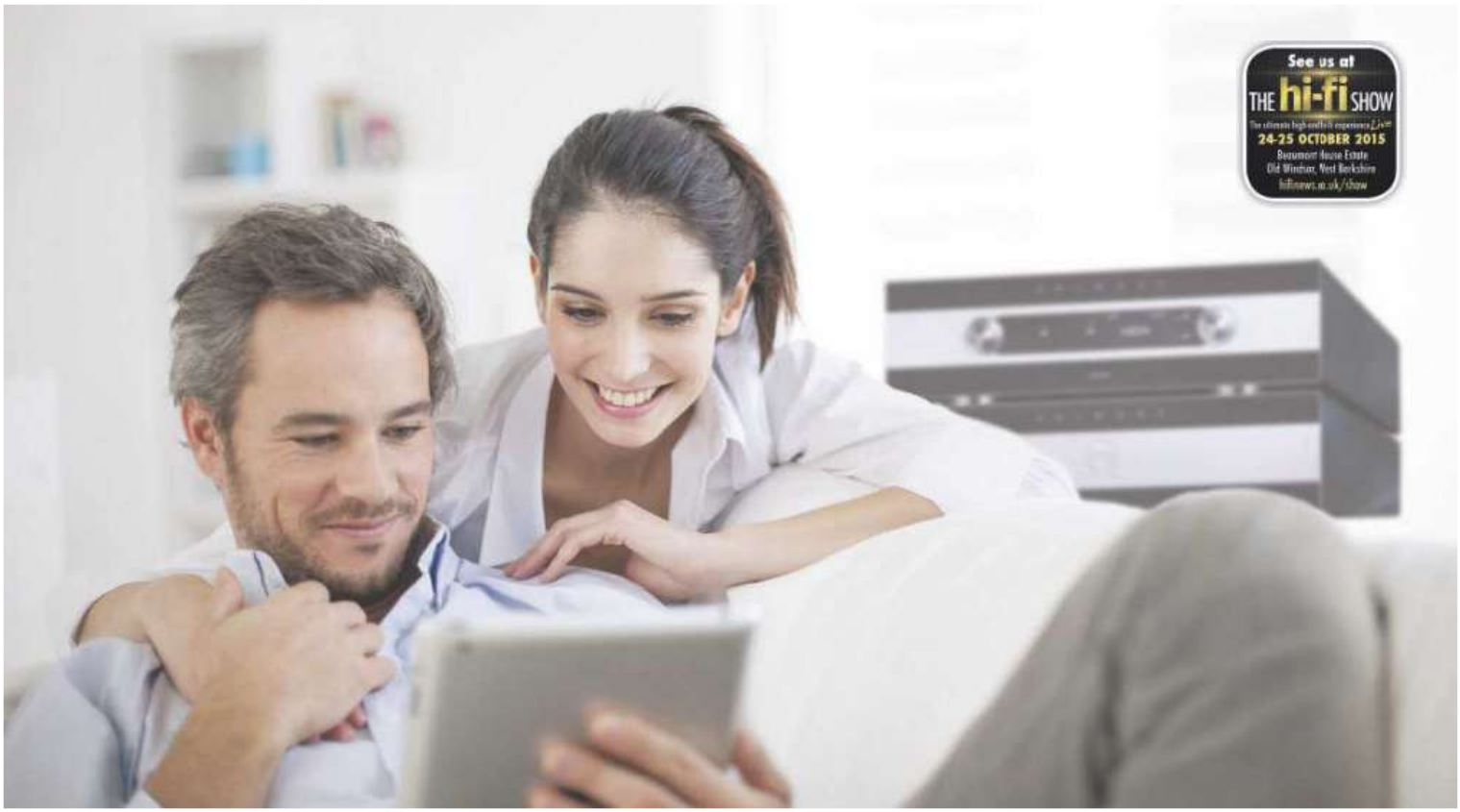
This speaker can produce great results in rooms that aren't big enough for the original Blade. It is very revealing of source quality but achieves this without making poor recordings less listenable than they need to be.



RIGHT: The Blade Two's sleek moulded cabinet stands on a substantial oval plinth with sturdy feet. The standard of finish is superb, with no visible fixings for the drive units. At the rear are two reflex ports for the upper and lower bass unit pairs. The Blade Two is bi-wirable, if preferred

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	86.9dB/87.2dB/87.0dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.7ohm @ 37Hz 13.8ohm @ 2.5kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–35° @ 6.5kHz 42° @ 1.5kHz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.8dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	55Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.2% / 0.6% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1461x338x475mm







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AUDIO FILE

Two-way reflex-loaded standmount loudspeakers
Made by: UK Distribution SRL, Treviso, Italy
Supplied by: Henley Designs Ltd, UK
Telephone: 01235 511166
Web: www.operaloudspeakers.com; www.henleydesigns.co.uk
Price: £4000

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

Opera Audio Callas II

Italians know a thing or two about style, so it's not unreasonable to expect that a new Opera loudspeaker won't be a dull, square box, and this £4000 Callas compact standmount design is most certainly neither. Frankly, the fit and finish is stunning and they are an elegant break from the loudspeaker norm.

However, this latest design – we're calling it the Callas II – is rather more conventional than its forebear, which boasted no fewer than five tweeters on its cabinet. These operated over different frequency ranges in an attempt to regulate the speaker's high frequency dispersion. For the new Callas, however, each loudspeaker simply uses the drivers that can be seen on the front baffle.

The SEAS 7in mid/bass driver is made to Opera's specifications and is loaded at the rear of the cabinet by a 55mm-diameter port. High frequencies are handled by a Scanspeak 9700 tweeter, which has a 1in textile dome with a moving mass of 0.45g and, unusually, no ferrofluid in the magnet gap.

Opera is clearly confident of Scanspeak's engineering, as it utilises the same tweeter in several other of its loudspeakers.

'The live recording was vivid, Clapton locked perfectly centre-stage'

The crossover that unites these two drivers uses second-order slopes on both bass and treble and is split to allow bi-wiring or bi-amping. Additionally, there's a switch on the rear of the cabinet that is claimed to alter the output of the 300-3000Hz band by 2dB.

The cabinet is made from veneered MDF and curved plywood and boasts an internal volume of 14 litres. Meanwhile the thickness of the enclosure varies from 25 to 50mm and the reverse side of the baffle is milled in order to minimise air turbulence behind the woofer.

Behind this driver there's a layer of open-cell foam with a pyramidal shape to absorb internal reflections. Due to the construction of this more diffuse material, Opera claims that no other absorbent is required inside the cabinet, thus improving the midrange performance.

WORTHY OF THE NAME

Opera's Callas IIs really are *molto bene*. They do a remarkable job of impersonating much larger loudspeakers and have a scale and dynamism that is addictive. In short, they are genuinely high-end loudspeakers, merely scaled down into a manageable package.

Across the midband they projected superbly, picking fine instrumental detail from the depths of recordings with aplomb. And at the top end, that lovely SEAS tweeter served up a deliciously crisp and clean treble.

Playing one of our 'good music buried in a bad recording' test tracks, 'Only When I Sleep' from The Corrs' *Talk On Corners* CD [Atlantic] fazed the Operas not one little bit. They certainly didn't give the generally unpleasant overall rendering we have heard from lesser loudspeakers but confirmed that Andrea Corr's voice is a truly delightful thing to behold and was in fine form on this 1977 recording.

'Hey Hey' from Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* LP [Reprise Records] showed off the Callas II's strengths more effectively. The live recording was vivid and atmospheric and Clapton was locked perfectly centre-stage. His acoustic guitar even seemed to have grown in stature, such was the immediacy and precision of each string pluck. They certainly have plenty of impact and depth to them, and they do a remarkable job of imitating something bigger, particularly when fed a rollicking bass line. This was highlighted by the opening to Lissie's 'Further Away' from *Back To Forever* [Sony] where the low end action was punchy and taut, setting the rest of the track up perfectly.



ABOVE: The Callas II utilises drive units from SEAS and Scanspeak and is enclosed in a very stylish and sturdy MDF and plywood cabinet. The main curved body is available in high gloss Walnut or Mahogany veneers

VERDICT

These new Opera Callas speakers are beautifully crafted and based around high quality drive units. They offer a sonic stature and rhythmic demeanour that belies their relatively compact dimensions.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.4dB/88.6dB/88.2dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.5ohm @ 236Hz 16.5ohm @ 81Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–46° @ 102Hz 41° @ 22Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	±1.2dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	53Hz / 37.7kHz/31.9kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 0.5% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	420x245x420mm

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AUDIO FILE

Floorstanding three-and-a-half way loudspeaker
Made by: Sonus faber SpA (Fine Sounds Group), Italy
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.sonusfaber.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £47,000 (Gold leaf finish, +£20k approx.)

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Sonus faber Lilium

With this £47k Lilium floorstander, Sonus faber has produced perhaps a more 'realistic' loudspeaker than its flagship The Sonus faber [*HFN* Feb '11]. Though if you happen to be a Russian oligarch, an extra £20k will add a lacquered gold-leaf finish!

The tapering cabinet is shaped in the form of company's now-familiar 'lyre' cross-section. Another nod to Sonus faber's historical precedents is the sloped glass plate above the top-mounted infra-bass woofer.

The Lilium is a further exercise in eliminating vibration and spurious noise. The recipe includes separate enclosures for the subwoofer and isolation of the tweeter and midrange in their own sub-enclosure, and a 'no port noise' passive radiator. The structure is damped and ribbed to help reject 'spurious vibrations and standing waves', and incorporates aluminium damping shelves at the top and bottom of each enclosure.

All the drivers are new. They include a 28mm H28 XTR-04 'Arrow Point' damped Apex Dome tweeter with neodymium magnet, and the M18 XTR-04 180mm mid with neodymium magnet and CCAW wire on a composite former.

The mid employs a diaphragm damped with a viscous surface coating and made with 'a blend of traditional cellulose pulp, kapok, kenaf and other natural fibres'. Behind the tweeter/mid sub-baffle is an acoustic chamber, with a coaxial anti-compressor to reduce cavity resonances and distortions.

Below this mini-baffle are the three W18XTR-16 180mm midwoofers. These feature sandwich cones made of a 'syntactic foam' core and two external surface skins of cellulose pulp. Further reinforcing the bass are the SW26 XT-08 260mm infra-woofer and its companion ABR.

The crossover operates at 80Hz, 250Hz and 2500Hz, and incorporates Mundorf's Supreme Silver/Gold/Oil capacitors with Jantzen inductors. A rotary control on the upper back section sets the bass level, while there's a choice of single, bi- or tri-wiring.

A NEW TRANSPARENCY

However much we may love small two-ways, when it comes to speakers there is no substitute for size. In this respect, Sonus faber's Lilium is a classic tower, with its broad stage width amply balanced by similar depth.

And with its additional transparency, Eric Clapton's 'Tears In Heaven' was as intimate as we have ever heard, the closeness apparent on every track. Our version was taken from the remastered *Unplugged* in 192kHz/24-bit, and every sparkling note, every plucked string had a presence so real that to say 'in the room' almost seems insufficient. Transient attack? Nigh on perfect.

> 'Eric Clapton's "Tears In Heaven" was as intimate as we have ever heard it'

'Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out' had a glorious lilt, the piano accompaniment so authentic that we felt a pianist could tell the instrument's make. The ringing, chiming notes and the liquid flow… we were at a loss to find any area to criticise.

By contrast, two old recordings – vintage mono tracks from The Cardinals and George Formby – that we'd ripped from CDs spoke volumes about the Lilium's prowess… if getting closer to the music is what this is all about.

VERDICT

Sonus faber has certainly rediscovered its 'mojo' for making huge floorstanders. Stradivari/Amati win on grace and subtlety, Lilium on power and sheer scale. This a truly magnificent loudspeaker.



RIGHT: The complex 3.5-way topology includes a top-mounted infra-bass bass unit with a diffracting cover, 28mm tweeter, 180mm mid and three 180mm woofers. Bass level can be adjusted by ±2dB for the room or personal taste, while three pairs of terminals allow for up to tri-wiring or tri-amplification

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	92.4dB/90.2dB/89.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.1ohm @ 27Hz 15.9ohm @ 1.4kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–42° @ 2.1kHz 45° @ 108Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±2.3dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	<40Hz / 38.1kHz/38.4kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.4% / 0.8% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD)	1600x491x705mm



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AUDIO FILE

Three-way reflex-loaded standmount loudspeaker
Made by: Technical Audio Devices Labs Inc., Japan
Supplied by: NuNu Distribution Ltd, UK
Telephone: 0203 5442338
Web: www.tad-labs.com; www.nunudistribution.co.uk
Price: £15,995

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

TAD CE1

Although the TAD Labs web page calls the 67-litre CE1 'a bookshelf speaker' it's surely a standmount and indeed there's a £1395 matching stand in matt and piano black.

The design of the CE1 is clearly a nod towards the company's Reference Series CR1 Mk2 design but with a few innovations of its own. Technologies shared with the CR1 Mk2, however, are TAD's 'Coherent Source Transducer' coaxial driver design and 'Structurally Inert Laminated Enclosure Technology' cabinet construction. This technique is based around a framework of rigid plywood combined with MDF, achieving high strength with low levels of 'boxy' resonance.

The enclosure has absorbent material to damp standing waves, all strategically placed as a result of acoustical analysis.

'The double-bass was as fruity and deep as could possibly be hoped for'

The CE1 sports a 140mm magnesium main driver and 35mm beryllium dome tweeter with a crossover point of 2kHz. Tweeter manufacture involves a vapour deposition process that TAD claims gives excellent rigidity and strength but with low mass and reduced coloration. Below 250Hz, there's a dedicated 180mm bass unit, based around a one-piece dust cap and cone assembly built from multiple layers of aramid fibres.

The unit's surround is a pleated 'accordion' – relatively uncommon but offering advantages in terms of linearity and high power handling. The bass driver is reflex-loaded, but, in a departure from its siblings and predecessors, the CE1 utilises a novel 'Aero Dynamic Slot' port.

Fit and finish is nothing short of stunning. The central section is completed in a high gloss Tropical Olive wood veneer and the side sections are available in black or white. Additionally, the brushed aluminium panels are offered in a choice of silver or dark grey.

REMARKABLE INSIGHTS

The first, almost overwhelming, aspect of the loudspeakers' performance is their truly remarkable clarity. As a result of this, every musical performance becomes a masterclass in atmosphere, detail and insight.

The subtle effects that linger in the background of Madonna's 'Frozen' from *Ray Of Light* [Warner] seemed to hang in the air in the space between the loudspeakers in a most uncanny way, while at the bottom end, the TADs revealed themselves to be more than capable of digging deeply.

The bass line to 'What I Am' from Edie Brickell And The New Bohemians' *Shooting Rubberbands At The Stars* [Geffen Records] was beautifully detailed and tautly rhythmical. And the double-bass pattern supporting Patricia Barber on 'Bye Bye Blackbird' from *Night Club* [Blue Note] was as deliciously fruity and deep as could be hoped. Each note arrived with impeccable timing, exhibited a vivid fulsomeness and then faded off into the distance.

An equal delight on this track was the piano accompaniment – the CE1s captured the innate nature of the ivories being tinkled and presented them so magnificently that we hit the 'repeat' button a number of times and forgot all about review notes and analysis!

VERDICT

The CE1s may be TAD's 'entry level' loudspeaker but there is no sense that any corners have been cut. Intelligent engineering, magnificent build quality and an impeccable finish all add up to a loudspeaker that can claim a place among the finest made. Music through the CE1s is truly captivating.



ABOVE: TAD's coaxial driver combines a magnesium midrange with a beryllium tweeter for the CE1. The aramid fibre-based bass driver is augmented by side-firing reflex ports

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	86.4dB/85.4dB/84.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.7ohm @ 125Hz 31.7ohm @ 3.9kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–66° @ 25Hz 52° @ 1.9kHz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	±1.7dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	48Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 0.1% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	524x290x446mm

THE PATHWAY OF DISTINCTION



"Vocals were sensational for any loudspeaker, never mind one that costs less than $2k."
Robert Harley - **The Absolute Sound** - October '14



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AUDIO FILE

Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Made by: Triangle, France
Supplied by: Audio Emotion Ltd, Scotland
Telephone: 01333 425999
Web: www.triangle-fr.com; www.audioemotion.co.uk
Price: £6000

hi-fi news HIGHLY COMMENDED

Triangle Signature Alpha

Like all Triangle's designs, the new £6000 Signature Alpha is unmistakably Gallic in conception, but it's a product that's evolved far beyond any national barriers.

The sleek moulding that peeps up above the Alpha's gracefully-curved cabinet houses the latest version of Triangle's horn-loaded TZ2550 25mm dome tweeter, which handles frequencies above 2.6kHz and sits in a new compression chamber claimed to improve 'detail, finesse and transparency'.

The 185mm midrange unit uses a doped paper cone with a small-pleat short-travel suspension, but the old phase plug has been replaced with a dustcap of identical shape and size, while the aluminium chassis has been redesigned to improve the ventilation of the two-layer voice coil.

The three bass units have a fibreglass cone with an aluminium centre cover or dustcap, and an inverted half-roll rubber surround. Each of these drivers has a two-layer voice coil embraced by a substantial double-magnet motor system, the upper and lower units being reflex-loaded in two separate sections of the cabinet.

The curvaceous cabinets have their side panels made by bending and laminating seven 3mm sheets of fibreboard in a press while the front baffle is reinforced further to a total thickness of 25mm. A closer look down below reveals the way the bottom edges are bevelled off at the sides, so that the main plinth supports the cabinet on a relatively narrow spine section along the centre line of the speaker. The plinth has what Triangle calls its 'SPEC' system, in which a special fifth foot is placed directly under the front baffle to act 'like the endpin of a cello', says Triangle, 'to ground mechanical energy.'

PROPER SCALE

Here was a speaker that gave an immediately pleasing and enjoyable sense of scale, delivering a really big stereo image that had a good feeling of height as well as width. On Diana Krall's 'California Dreamin'' from *Wallflower* [Verve] those wonderful strings arched right over the imaginary stage, above and behind the singer. All the while there were plenty of little details to remind you what a classy production this is.

'There was a real sense of hearing a concert grand placed on a stage'

With pianist Paul Lewis and *Pictures At An Exhibition* [Harmonia Mundi] there was a real unity between the elements that made up the piano sound, from the initial attack through to the end of a note as the hall reverberation tailed away. There was a real sense of hearing a concert grand on a stage, and the lowest registers – as in 'Bydlo' – were truly impressive.

And with the Voces8's take on Elgar's 'Nimrod', from their album *Lux* [see p145] we felt that the Triangle's attractively big sound really helped it win the day. Here the voices were really laid out beautifully in the recorded acoustic, producing a thrilling effect.

VERDICT

That almost daunting array of drive units is harnessed successfully here to give a vibrant, lively mid and treble with a deep, satisfyingly free-sounding bass and huge stereo stage. This is a likeable speaker with real individuality that demands to be heard.



RIGHT: Available in white, black or mahogany gloss lacquers, the Signature Alpha is bi-wirable. The integral plinth features a front 'grounding' support pin. The three bass units are reflex-loaded by the special 'Twin Vent' port in the middle

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	90.9dB/90.1dB/89.9dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.5ohm @ 115Hz 20.7ohm @ 62Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–56° @ 72Hz 33° @ 21Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	±2.0dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	49Hz / 30.6kHz/29.8kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.3% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1270x233x372mm

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AUDIO FILE

Two-and-a-half-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Made by: Wharfedale Hi-Fi
Supplied by: Wharfedale Hi-Fi UK
Telephone: 01480 431737
Web: www.wharfedale.co.uk
Price: £499

hi-finews HIGHLY COMMENDED

Wharfedale Diamond 230

Diamonds of the Wharfedale variety have so far lasted 31 years, with each incarnation putting the accent on getting a big sound from a small box.

However, everything today seems to be getting bigger – and that includes this £500 floorstander. The third model up the new Diamond 200 range, the 230 is the smallest floorstander and it sports a new reflex-loaded cabinet sandwich construction. The baffle design is new too, along with an improved 'Slot-Loaded Distributed Port' that is said to reduce air turbulence.

To achieve resilience and to avoid smear or boom, Wharfedale has elected to use an 18mm-thick sandwich of particleboard and MDF ('Crystalam') for its 35litre cabinet.

'The chiming digital synthesisers came over with a visceral impact'

The front baffle – a one-piece affair in the same colour as the rest of the speaker – is fitted with two 165mm woven Kevlar bass/midband drivers with semi-elliptical 'break-up' areas, visible as raised 'V shapes'.

Diamond-cut drive unit trim rings add to a feeling of sophistication while the smooth piano lacquered cabinet finish is excellent and comes in a choice of black, white (as here), walnut and rosewood.

Kicking in above 2.3kHz, the 25mm textile dome tweeter employs an advanced ferrite magnet system and it has a special waveguide around the fabric dome for improved dispersion.

The bass port is a slot at the bottom of the cabinet, and it works in a subtle enough way to enable the 230 to be placed a little closer to boundary walls than with many rivals. Our review samples sat 30cm into the room on their plinths and spikes, gently toed in.

TIGHT AND TUNEFUL

The Diamond 230 is a most capable performer at the price, with a clean and dry yet powerful and punchy sound. This speaker offered a deeper bass than we expected, and a more articulate one too.

Scritti Politti's 'The Word Girl' from *Cupid And Psyche* [Virgin], for example, can often overwhelm smaller floorstanders but singularly failed to knock the Diamond off course – instead it sounded taut, tight and tuneful. Singer Green Gartside's silky vocals were carried with consummate smoothness, yet the chiming digital synthesisers still came over with great visceral impact and bite.

Nor is REM's 'Driver 8' from *Fables Of The Reconstruction* [IRS Records] an easy ride, but the Diamond delivered the song with a mixture of refinement and power. Its drive units and cabinet were of sufficient quality to 'get out of the way' so you could hear through a murky mix. Indeed, the 230 has no 'hot spots' anywhere in its range that we could discern.

The song steamed along at a fair rate of knots, with fine resolution of the leading edges of notes and good tracking of dynamics. This speaker can throw images out into the room with real accuracy and hang them back well too.

VERDICT

This new Wharfedale Diamond turns in a musical performance that's surprisingly devoid of problems. Smooth, open and detailed yet powerful and confident, it delivers excellent results. Factor in attractive styling and fine build quality, and you ask what's not to like about this little gem?



ABOVE: The gloss white 'Crystalam' cabinet is a hybrid of variable density particle boards. It houses a 25mm soft dome tweeter and twin 165mm woven Kevlar mid/bass drivers

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.6dB/87.3dB/87.1dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.3ohm @ 151Hz 13.0ohm @ 2.6kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–29° @ 4.7kHz 30° @ 601Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±2.6dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	59Hz / 28.9kHz/30.5kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.5% / 0.6% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	938x196x306mm



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AUDIO FILE

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Made by: Wilson Audio Specialties, Utah, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
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hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

Wilson Audio Sabrina

Though far from budget-priced at £15k per pair, the new Sabrina screams 'bargain' so loudly that every model the company sells for below £35k is now under threat!

To create this little miracle *père-et-fils* Dave and Daryl Wilson looked backward to the original WATT/Puppy, as well as to the current Alexandria XLF [*HFN* Oct '12]. This new baby had to exhibit exceptional time-alignment, despite employing an enclosure lacking the tuning capability of designs using two or more adjustable sections.

Its sleek, angular form breaks away from parallel-sided, wooden or black boxes to become wholly modern, functional sculpture.

> 'The Sabrina recreates both the ambience *and* the spatial specifics'

And because all Wilson cabinets are made with proprietary materials, the finishes provide the option to choose the colour of what *will* invade a room despite its relatively diminutive size. When constructed, each enclosure is hand-sanded, gel-coated and painted with multiple layers of automotive-grade paint in Wilson's bespoke booth.

The Sabrina utilises the 8in paper cone woofer from the Alexia [*HFN* Mar '13] modified specifically for this enclosure, a 5¾in paper pulp mid and the company's proprietary 1in doped-silk dome Convergent Synergy Tweeter. The sloping front baffle, says Wilson Audio 'has been optimised for correct driver time alignment in the typical room.'

SIMPLY REAL

Starting with a burned-to-CD transfer of Otis Redding's '(Sitting On The) Dock Of The Bay', the first thing that struck us was the bass. It was the drumming – the magnificent Al Jackson – that sounded so utterly real, with proper decay, which immediately rendered Sabrina's size a non-concern.

For this song, scale might not seem that important, but when the brass section swells, you appreciate that intimacy can be preserved even when the performance involves more than a duo or trio. The way that these Sabrinas merged any three-dimensional aspects with tonal realism ensured that the experience would be as fresh as at any point since it was first heard 48 years ago.

Moving on to mono, The Cardinals' 'The Door Is Still Open' and 'Shouldn't I Know' [Collectibles] demonstrated the Sabrina's capacity for focus. Familiar with these through the far dearer Alexias we found the smaller speakers' treatment of one central image exhibited the same enchanting qualities, sharing an ability to make the listener forget that the sound was only in mono.

With Angie Stone's cover of 'You Will Know' for the Stevie Wonder tribute, *Conception* [Motown], the percussion was again the element that grabbed the ear, but the track also had a unique atmosphere, a fluidity that contrasted with the crispness of the drumming. The vocals – so natural and real as to defy belief – hovered without seeming disembodied because the Sabrina recreates both the ambience *and* the spatial specifics.

VERDICT

The Sabrina is the best-value Wilson speaker ever – and we've heard all of 'em since the first WATT. It sounds as 'big' as a speaker double its height and there isn't a trace of compression when blasting loudly. It's truly sublime.



ABOVE: Wilson remains committed to single-wiring-only connections. The Sabrina has dedicated 'ports' for bass and mid/treble sections and uses the tweeter found in the Alexia

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.7dB/87.6dB/87.6dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.4ohm @ 146Hz 20.1ohm @ 20Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–64° @ 68Hz 32° @ 253Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±0.8dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	54Hz / 31.0kHz/29.0kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.3% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	965x305x386mm

hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE

RCA and XLR-terminated silver interconnect cables
Made by: Atlas (Scotland) Ltd, Kilmarnock
Supplied by: Atlas Cables
Telephone: 01563 572666
Web: www.atlascables.com
Price: £2750 (1m RCA stereo set)

AUDIO FILE



Atlas Asimi Ultra

Silver has long been the conductor of choice for many audiophiles even though its implementation typically comes at a premium price. Atlas's flagship is certainly not timidly priced, but it's far from being the costliest silver-based interconnect to tempt the well-heeled enthusiast.

Befitting of its place in the Atlas range, the Asimi Ultra is beautifully constructed and finished – its new Ultra phono plugs are exquisitely machined and polished, the silver-plated contacts offering a deliciously snug fit with standard RCA phonos (XLR termination is also offered). These plugs offer a 57% reduction in material weight over their predecessors and employ a solid cylinder of Teflon as the internal dielectric.

Each conductor strand is drawn using the OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) process, employing a heated die to minimise interstitial grain boundaries within the metal.

> 'The Turn's percussion and rich guitar work dripped with opulent detail'

Atlas claims one grain boundary per 125m of cable, but this is likely to increase over time due to its physical handling in construction and use. Avoid tight radiuses as you hook Asimi Ultra between components, and certainly avoid treading on long runs between racks, and its crystal structure will be preserved. Choice of dielectric is also key to the 'sound' of any cable and here Atlas has chosen a microporous PTFE tape covered by a flexible polyethylene layer.

The new Asimi Ultra adopts a symmetrical geometry with identical signal and return cores comprising six bundles of 12 silver strands surrounding a thicker strand in the centre. The twisted signal/return pair is covered by a continuous copper-mylar electrostatic screen and a silver-plated copper braid, offering shielding from RF and other extraneous noise. The outer sheath is made from HD PVC covered by a very attractive and functional light grey woven cotton.

Silver has the highest electrical conductivity of any metal, ahead of copper and gold, and this is reflected in the low 56mohm/m loop resistance we measured for the Asimi Ultra, a figure complemented by its low 86pF/m parallel capacitance, moderate 0.45µH/m inductance and 33Mohm leakage.

It's obviously a good choice for long runs, and Atlas offers a range of 0.5m, 0.75m, 1.0m, 1.5m, 2.0m, 2.5m and 3.0m lengths. A 1m set costs £2750.

ABOVE: The Asimi Ultra interconnect is terminated with Atlas's own solder-free Ultra phono plugs which have self-cleaning contacts

SILVER TONGUED

Used between an Oppo BDP-105D player/DAC and Krell S-1500 amp, the Asimi Ultra immediately dispelled the notion that silver cables necessarily emphasise treble detail. Recorded live to two-track and mastered by Doug Sax, the percussion and rich guitar work that infuses Jerome Sabbagh's *The Turn* [96kHz/24-bit FLAC; Bee Jazz] was dripping with opulent detail. Notes rolled off the cymbals with a casual clarity while the lush tenor sax lit the scene with a warm glow. We were hearing an 'analogue' system at its best, enjoying music with no hint of grain pervading the open, atmospheric and fresh-sounding vista before us.

Vocals typically sounded superb too, as was shown by the fabulously unlikely duet between Tony Bennett and Lady Gaga [*Cheek To Cheek*, 96kHz/24-bit FLAC]. The Asimi was party to revealing a powerful set of lungs on the Lady while TB sounded as assured as ever. A fun recording revealed by a great cable.

VERDICT

Just as there are audio bloggers who never like an amp once they find it's Class D, there's a similar myth that silver cables all sound 'bright'. They don't, as the Atlas Asimi Ultra demonstrates. It allows the very best hi-fi systems to sing: loud, sharp and clear when required, or soft, slow and relaxed as the music demands.

HFN SPECIFICATIONS

Series Inductance (1m loop)	0.45µH
Parallel Capacitance (1m)	86pF
Resistance (1m loop)	56mohm
Leakage	33Mohm
Price (1m RCA pair)	£2750

AUDIO FILE

4mm/spade-terminated loudspeaker cable
Made by: Audience, San Marcos, CA, USA
Supplied by: High End Cable, UK
Telephone: 01775 761880
Web: www.audience-av.com www.highendcable.co.uk
Price: £2090 (3m stereo set)

hi-fi news EDITOR'S CHOICE



Audience Au24 SE

There's much more to Audience's loudspeaker cable than meets the eye, although its Au24 SE model is already one of the more attractive and unimposing designs on the high-end scene. In fact, the sylphlike build of its cable goes directly to the heart of the company's two key design philosophies.

Audience claims with some justification that reducing eddy currents within a cable will necessarily improve signal propagation, the former also influenced by the thickness – the mass – of the conductors themselves. Part of Audience's juggling act is realised in reducing the conductor size without unduly impacting on its resistance, a trade-off amounting to 85mohm/m or a power loss of 0.092dB/m for the Au24 SE. Audience specifies very fine strands of superior OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) copper, but the overall cross-sectional area of the conductor is evidently quite small.

> 'The Au24 SE ensured that the sound was serene without lacking authority'

If you were to stretch to a 5m stereo set (a not inconsiderable £2750) this would amount to a loop resistance of 0.425ohm, which is sufficient to cause some exaggeration of the amp/speaker system response in line with swings in the speaker's impedance.

Any 'change' in sound will also depend on the output impedance of the amplifier, the effect necessarily less obvious with many tube amps but arguably more so with designs like the NAD M22 or Devialet 800s used in our listening tests.

Audience also subscribes to the idea that aspects of transmission line theory – normally applied to the propagation of very high frequency/RF signals – extend down to the audioband and, by way of example, has contrived a geometry that achieves a notional 15ohm characteristic impedance. Other cable companies have argued similarly in the past, achieving a low characteristic impedance by paralleling multiple 50ohm coaxial lines.

Capacitance also typically rises as a result, so Audience, in another carefully tuned trade-off, has opted for a single and extremely densely-packed coaxial geometry for the Au24 SE using a hard polypropylene dielectric and polyethylene sleeve. Capacitance is still higher than average at 595pF/m (a full 1.8nF for the £2090, 3m set reviewed here) but at least the associated inductance is proportionally if not vanishingly low at just 0.41µH/m.

ABOVE: There's no 24K gold inside Audience's Au24 SE but this svelte cable does harbour plenty of innovative thinking. It is available with Z-plug (BFA banana) and spade terminations, or even a mixture of both to suit amp and speaker

AN AUDIENCE WITH...

Straight out of the blocks, Audience's Au24 SE moves with grace rather than a flat-out sprint. In our Devialet/B&W 802D system it encouraged a particularly relaxed but still very insightful and finely detailed sound. The brightest of brass instruments typically sounded silky-smooth, the roughest of rock recordings coated in a rich honey. And yet modest lengths of Au24 SE do not render the music in so civilised a fashion that it fails to stir the blood.

Take Troyka's recent Naim Label release, *Ornithophobia*, as a case in point. This is a powerful recording with occasionally fierce percussion but its somewhat dystopian subject matter never grates, thanks to the Au24 SE's trick of maintaining all the musical bite while simultaneously lancing any poison. Bass is robust and well-rounded too, if perhaps not so taut as achieved with the Devialets coupled with a far thicker cable. Not that we especially noticed any lack of grip or drive, for the system possessed an almost liquid ease and fluidity, the Au24 SE ensuring the sound was serene without lacking authority.

VERDICT

You might baulk at the Au24 SE's seemingly under-nourished frame. But there is method in Audience's sparing application of OCC copper strands and in the unusual choice of a tight coaxial geometry. It's a very smooth-sounding cable, arguably best suited to shorter runs, but still supremely compelling.



HFN SPECIFICATIONS

Series Inductance (1m loop)	0.41µH
Parallel Capacitance (1m)	595pF
Resistance (1m loop)	85mohm
Leakage	100Mohm
Power Loss (8ohm speaker)	0.092dB/m
Price (3m stereo set)	£2090

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"The Perfect Wave Memory (PWM) player seemed to act synergistically with the DirectStream, enhancing the latter's ability to retrieve the maximum amount of sonic information, and sounding even less "digital" in the process".

"I was struck by the claim, made by PS Audio's CEO Paul McGowan, that the processing done by the DirectStream results in superior playback of CDs. I heard more musical detail from CD than I had previously had. This detail was genuinely higher resolution manifested by greater differentiation among the sounds of instruments and rhythmic patterns. Quite amazing".

Robert Deutsch – Stereophile Feb 2015



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Technics SL-150

Technics made some of its direct-drive models available as 'motor units', *ie*, just the motor, platter and plinth – no arm. These tended to come from the upper end of the company's range, but here we have a more basic offering: the SL-150.

It first appeared in 1975 and was also available with a factory-fitted arm. The SL-150 could take a variety of arm types, but the SME 3009 was favoured, the deck coming ready cut to take one with the minimum of fuss. At around £130, it was a reasonably priced motor unit worth fitting with a decent arm.

The Technics direct-drive motor is uniquely designed. The driving coils are attached to a plate, which is mounted in the plinth, and the magnets fit into a machined recess in the rigid diecast aluminium platter. The thinking behind this arrangement was to minimise the number of interfaces between the motive force and the record.

> 'Each instrument was presented in relief with plenty of space around it'

This method of construction was used in all the top Technics direct-drive turntables, from the SP-10 professional model downwards, and was well respected for the excellent results that it could give.

The SL-150 is not quartz-locked but the motor is still electronically regulated and can have its speed tuned to a fine degree. In 1978 the SL-150Mk2 was introduced, which did include a quartz-locked servo. However, it was based on a completely different line of models and the two decks have little in common, the name probably being chosen for marketing reasons alone.

The SL-110 had established a synergy between the Technics direct-drive motor unit, an SME 3009 arm and a Shure V15 cartridge, the combination being so popular that it almost became a cliché. Our sample of the SL-150 tested here continues that theme with updated versions of both arm and cartridge. It is fitted with an SME 3009 Series III, which was announced in the Sep '77 issue of *HFN*. It's an arm that polarised opinion and first impressions are not overwhelmingly favourable. It still feels as if savings have been made in construction, when compared with earlier versions.

The Shure V15 we have is also the 'III'. The Shure V15 was one of the first cartridges that the public new by name and aspired to own. Although not especially exotic nowadays, it still has a certain draw.

A SILENT RUNNER

Like many Japanese turntables, the SL-150 forgoes any sort of internal suspension but has vibration absorbing feet. Audio-specific furniture is therefore recommended. Flicking the switch makes the SL-150's platter lumber up to speed smoothly and silently, and once it's running you can't hear the motor at all.

In our system the SL-150/3009 Series III/V15 III sounded a little too bright and the traditional way to counter this would have been with a softer-sounding amp.

Leaving such matching issues aside, the combination performed well and was fast paced, vivid and capable of extracting plenty of detail from records.

A turntable with a brisk turn of pace and a lively sound like the Technics' is a natural fit for rock music so we began with Sniff 'N' The Tears' *Fickle Heart* [Chiswick].

The key track here is, of course, 'Driver's Seat' and sure enough the music seemed to be propelled along in perfect time by the deck's precision. Each note had a definite start and end; fine detail was noted around the strummed guitar chords and the combination appeared able to offer real insight.

Similarly, Toto's 'Rosanna', from *IV* [CBS], satisfied with its stops and starts, only the splashy sound of the cymbals counting against the presentation. This track is recorded on a grand scale, which the Technics/SME/Shure team was well able to render. We can't imagine many rock fans would be disappointed with the delivery.

Sade's *Promise* [Epic] opens with 'Is It A Crime' and 'The Sweetest Taboo', both of which benefited from the near silent background of the Technics/SME/Shure combination. Each instrument was presented in vivid relief, with plenty of space around it.

ABOVE: **The classic combination of Technics SL-150, SME 3009 arm and Shure V15 cartridge. And it's still a tempting one as each manufacturer was a leader in its field when the ensemble was new**

VERDICT

As a basic motor unit, the Technics SL-150 excels. It is sturdy, silent and holds its speed admirably. We were not convinced that the SME 3009 Series III tonearm and Shure V15 III cartridge are the best match for it, however, but that's the joy of units such as this – just try another!

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.26rpm (–0.2%)
Time to audible stabilisation	2.5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.03%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	–69.5dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	–72.7dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	–62.9dB
Power Consumption	4-18W (1W idle)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	453x139x366mm / 7.8kg



B&O Beogram CD50

In the mid 1980s, once it became clear that CD was set to become a winner, hi-fi manufacturers at all levels were keen to have a player in their range. For many the easiest thing to do was to buy in machines from the big boys then re-brand them.

For the CD50 B&O went to Aiwa, selecting the DX-1500 model as the donor. However, what made the Beogram CD50 different from other early CD players was the way it was integrated with the host system.

To properly match the other Beosystem 5000 components, the new CD player also had to fit into the same slim chassis – in contrast with most early CD players which were narrow and tall rather than flat and wide. Nevertheless, the Aiwa fitted the bill, although it was necessary for B&O to machine away part of the inside of each top cover to accommodate the mechanism.

Other Beosystem 5000 hallmarks were also present, like the red four-digit LED display and the control functions at each end of the silver strip on the front. Even the four-character name had been chosen so that the text could be laid out to match that of the other units.

> 'There's not a great deal to give away that this is an early player at all'

The Beogram CD50 was assembled by B&O in Denmark. There, bare Aiwa units from Japan were fitted into a B&O chassis and cabinet and equipped with a B&O front panel, microprocessor control system and connections. This gave the completed player the correct B&O finish and feel.

The Aiwa's signal circuits were untouched so the Beogram CD50 and the DX-1500 thus offer an identical performance. Technically, the DX-1500 was a typical second-generation Japanese machine. This meant that 2x oversampling and digital filtering were now included, courtesy of Yamaha's YM2201 chip. The 16-bit Burr-Brown PCM53 DAC was still time-shared between the two channels, so the machine was still somewhat behind contemporary European practice.

A three-beam laser pick-up was used and, unusually, this was mounted over the disc, shining downwards. Consequently, the disc had to be loaded label side down! The drawer could be closed either by pushing it or by using the play key, so the few controls – 'play', 'skip', 'off' and 'drawer open' – were sufficient to get you going and choose a track.

Even without the remote control the player is still usable today, and the B&O seven-pin DIN connector is augmented by a pair of standard RCAs, although some bulky modern plugs won't fit inside the recess at the back of the player.

BRIGHTLY ENERGETIC

Tonally, the Aiwa circuits provide an even-handed account of what's on the disc and nothing jumps out as obviously deficient once the music starts to play. In fact, there isn't a great deal to give away that this is an early player at all, apart from the lazy nature of the track searching system, which works in small jumps.

ABOVE: The Beogram CD50 makes almost every other CD player look fussy and cluttered, regardless of era. Black glass and machined aluminium are used for the fascia. Internally, while the PCB, transport and the transformer came from Aiwa, the rest was made by B&O

The player's weaknesses are to be found in its slightly splashy high treble and in the indistinct nature of any centre stage imaging.

Both these effects were clear with the Fleetwood Mac track 'Gypsy' [Warner]. The percussion was just a trifle busy and Stevie Nicks' vocals never seemed to quite gel in a central position.

Vocals aside, the various instruments were better placed and, as is often the case with early CD players, the presentation was bright and bursting with sheer energy.

Orchestral pieces flattered the CD50 more, we thought, as we enjoyed a delicious performance of Svendsen's *Romance* [DG]. The solo violin stood out clearly against a deep background, about which the other performers were spread. It had none of the feared wiriness that a lesser player could introduce, and the other sounds were rich yet neither excessively thick nor tubby – a fine balancing act, which it is easy to get wrong. Another plus point is that the CD50 is mechanically quiet once the track has been selected.

VERDICT

A durable machine and a competent performer, the Beogram CD50 is probably employed to best effect in a complete B&O system. The DX-1500 would be a better general choice, were it not so unusual.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	1.99Vrms at 445ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio	98.7dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0017% / 0.026%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0093% / 0.0012%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	–0.19dB to +0.45dB
Digital jitter	1920psec
Resolution @ –90dB	–16.5dB
Power consumption	15W
Dimensions (WHD)	420x75x325mm

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Meridian MLP

As the 1970s drew to a close, people started to say goodbye to huge amps festooned with every knob, button, switch and slider you could think of, giving preference to more minimalist concepts.

But with the arrival of CD in 1982/3, all those amps with just phono, tape and tuner inputs suddenly found themselves a connection short. Meridian's Allen Boothroyd and Bob Stuart then came up with the idea of an amplifier that could be customised.

They reasoned that the concept of modularity seen in their earlier models could be taken a step further and applied to a whole amplifier. Their thinking led to both the Meridian Component Amplifier (MCA) and the Meridian Component Preamplifier (MLP), featured here.

The MLP consisted of three modules in its most basic form. To the left was a routing and control unit that accepted a low voltage AC input from an external plug-top power unit. To the right of the power supply module came the input modules, six of which could be run by the single MLP power supply unit.

Inputs were available for MM phono, MC phono, CD, FM Tuner, Aux and Tape. Each of these units had a front panel flap that you pressed to select a particular input. Under each flap was an additional 'Tape Copy' button that would send the module's output to the Tape module for recording purposes.

Also available was a Tone Control module. Finally, at the right hand end, came the volume control unit and, at the rear, this carried a single 5-pin DIN socket providing the L/R stereo output. All modules were interconnected by a series of gold pins. To connect them, the units were simply pushed sideways together and this linked power, balanced audio signals and logic control lines throughout the unit.

Adding a new module was simply a case of undoing the volume control and removing it, fitting the spacers supplied with the new module, locating the unit and re-fitting the volume control.

In addition to the input and tone control sections, it was suggested at launch that both FM and AM tuner modules would be available. The AM unit never appeared and, while the FM variant was released in the form of the Meridian MFM tuner, this turned out to be a standalone design with its own power supply.

> 'The MLP rose to the challenge to give a clean and taut performance'

The Meridian Component Amplifier (MCA) was designed along similar lines but used a larger switchmode power supply unit feeding the two 30W power amp units.

PURPOSEFUL SOUNDS

The Meridian MLP proved to be a very 'modern' sounding unit, serving up a deliciously punchy, taut and well-paced performance. Bass lines were spry, deep and effortlessly rhythmical, with the MLP lapping up material that had a good beat.

With 'Let Go' from Frou Frou's 2002 CD *Details* [Island], the MLP grabbed the bass line by the scruff of its neck, pounding it out with a truly impressive sense of purpose. The percussion effects behind this were clear and crisp, and Imogen Heap's vocals soared forth.

Across the midband, Meridian's MLP was as detailed as could be wished for, the preamp spotlighting individual instruments, keeping them as vivid as possible within the overall performance without sounding too 'hot'.

Switching between the Aux and CD input modules at this point proved interesting as there was a faint softening of the sound through the dedicated CD section with some material. Diana Krall's 'I've Got You Under My Skin', from her CD *When I Look In Your Eyes* [Verve], became ever so slightly smoother through the CD input. However, the differences were very subtle.

Through the MM module, things were, if anything, even better. Guy Garvey's vocals on the beginning of Elbow's 'New York Morning' from *The Take Off And Landing Of Everything* [Fiction] were emotive and beautifully reproduced. When the pace of the track picked up, the MLP rose to the challenge to give a strong, clean and taut performance.

ABOVE: With the front flaps closed, the MLP was a paragon of style. In this state, the modules' source buttons could still be operated and an LED showed which one was selected. Each module offered source and tape copy selection and could memorise switch-on source selection and tone control settings

VERDICT

The Meridian MLP preamplifier was an ingenious design and while the Nextel finish isn't the most robust, the balanced internal circuitry and its clever implementation mean that the sound quality is still excellent by today's standards.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (<1% THD, 47kohm)	4.3Vrms (unbalanced)
Maximum input level (<1% THD)	7Vrms
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	233–235ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.25dB to –7.8dB
Input sensitivity (CD / MM, re. 0dBV)	315mV / 3.31mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD / MM, re. 0dBV)	98.1dB / 76.3dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 0dBV)	0.00075–0.0046%
Power consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD, main/module)	80/40x60x300mm

Internal processing 5,6 MHz, 72 bits
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Cambridge Audio P50

Cambridge Audio's P50 integrated (1970) is a pretty looking thing.

The unit is styled and properly finished on all faces, even the underside. The colour scheme too is attractive, the use of natural aluminium set against dark wood following the Continental trends of the time and still appealing now – as are the delicate bespoke controls and the tiny but immaculately neat lettering on the fascia. Recessed sockets at the rear complete what gives the impression of being a thoroughly professional job.

The P50 was also a well specified unit: the claimed power output was 25W per channel into 8ohm while two turntables (one with an MM cartridge and one with a ceramic pick-up, such as the Decca Deram) could be connected, along with a tuner, an auxiliary source and a tape recorder. Switchable filters set at 50Hz and 10kHz were also fitted.

Connecting the P50 to modern equipment is fairly straightforward since standard 4mm sockets are used for the loudspeaker outputs. The inputs are RCA types, although not all modern phono cables will fit them properly.

'We were treated to a pleasingly warm sound with a fulsome bass'

The auxiliary input could be useful for a CD player or a DAC, but its sensitivity is high, giving an abrupt volume control action if the source component has a high output level. But this problem is most easily dealt with by using external attenuators.

The Cambridge Audio P50 circuit concept differs from its contemporaries in a number of areas. The selected radio and auxiliary inputs enter an amplifier stage whose gain is variable from close to zero to around x13, and it's this stage that's used to regulate the volume. So when you rotate the P50's volume knob what you are actually doing is reducing the amount of negative feedback applied in the unit's first stage. The balance control works similarly.

The P50 would also have been regarded as progressive for having a DC-coupled power stage whose output reached the loudspeakers without having to pass through a transformer or capacitors first. It was also unusual in having a relay-based speaker protection system.

A GOOD COMPANION

Using a Cyrus CD8 SE2 as source and with the P50 driving a pair of Monitor Audio PL100s loudspeakers we were treated to a pleasingly warm sound with a fulsome bass, although in the absence of a signal there was noticeable background hum, albeit at a level well below what you'd expect from a vintage *valve* design.

Treble was just a touch diffuse: top end 'softness' was not an issue, but this model does not offer pin-sharp focus. In contrast to, say, the A&R A60 [*HFN* Jul '15], the midband is, if anything, recessed rather than prominent, and this lends it a more luxurious tonal balance.

ABOVE: Neat and timeless looking, the P50's most enduring aspect is probably its styling. Aluminium and dark stained wood was also favoured by continental manufacturers at the time. Its neat rear panel with recessed sockets, was finished to the same standards as the front

Playing Paul Simon's *The Rhythm Of The Saints* album [Warner] we found the P50 to be an entertaining and endearing performer. The deep percussion found on tracks such as 'Can't Run But' pushed at the edges of the P50's envelope, where it sounded slightly fuzzy around the edges at higher volume, and we'd also have liked a little more top end sparkle, but these foibles rarely detracted from the 'big picture'.

For a change of mood, we also tried the VPO's 1992 *New Year's Concert* [Sony]. Here the P50 was impressively able to convey the scale of the music if perhaps not its frenetic pace. The orchestra was rendered across a large and expansive soundstage with no obvious pooling around the loudspeakers. If there was a niggle it was that notes could, on occasion, smear into one another, taking away some of the impact of pieces like Josef Strauss's *Village Swallows From Austria*.

VERDICT

The stylish Cambridge Audio P50 may have some quirky circuitry but at heart it is a fine-sounding amp that would be well suited to a small system based around just a few simple sources. With secondhand prices highly affordable, it's a fine vintage buy.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	33W / 45W
Dynamic power (<1-2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	48W / 83W / 88W / 37W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.026–0.078ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz–100kHz, 0dBW)	–0.75dB to –2.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/25W)	70mV / 350mV (Radio input)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/25W)	73.9dB / 87.9dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.011–0.148%
Power consumption (Idle/rated output)	10W / 97W
Dimensions (WHD)	419x51x238mm

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Hitachi HMA-6500

Hitachi is recognised for one thing above all else: reliability. It also popularised an amplifier technology which is still in use today: the MOSFET (transistor).

With MOSFETs very little energy is needed to regulate the device, so useful power gains are possible. The Hitachi HMA-6500 reviewed here (which appeared in 1980) requires just eight transistors in each of its two channels to reach a claimed 55W at <0.02% THD midband. Quite some achievement!

Hitachi's MOSFET amplifiers began to appear towards the end of the 1970s. As well as being powerful, their measured performance was remarkable, giving excellent figures for distortion, noise and damping factor.

A company the size of Hitachi was not only able to design and make its own amplifiers but was also able to manufacture the components that went inside them. The 2SK133 and 2SJ48 power MOSFETs at the heart of the HMA-6500 are Hitachi originals.

'Vocals had a haunting quality and they were startlingly transparent'

Despite all the imitators, Hitachi's amplifiers remained the most reliable. This was due in part to the high quality materials and construction methods used but was also thanks to features aimed at preventing minor mishaps turning into major catastrophes.

The HMA-6500, for example, contains a special integrated circuit that monitors the amp's functioning, signalling a relay to disconnect the loudspeakers if it looks as if anything is about to go wrong. The same relay is used to ensure quiet and clean operation at switch-on and switch-off.

The MOSFETs themselves are mounted on a large heatsink at the back of the chassis due to the high standing current that is necessary to eliminate crossover distortion. Nearly 30W is dissipated here alone, even when no music is playing.

As a styling exercise, the HMA-6500 could easily be dismissed as generic and bland. The fascia is dominated by two oversized meters which at least serve to break up what would otherwise be an uninviting slab of plain metal.

The two controls, one for power and one to select which of two possible pairs of speakers are connected, are solid and feel like they will last forever, and there's a headphone socket on the fascia too. Inputs are on standard RCAs while the speaker terminals are screw clamps that'll accommodate all but the thickest cables.

HAUNTING VOCALS

The HMA-6500 is a joy to use – there are no clicks, pops and bangs when you switch it on and off, regardless of how the controls may be mishandled. When it comes to inputs there is a choice of either AC or DC coupling – the former is safest unless you are certain your preamp has a very low DC offset.

ABOVE: New model or 35-year-old classic? It's hard to tell now that Hitachi's late '70s styling is back in vogue. Finish is immaculate and it's good to see a headphone socket, so often omitted. But if using preamps from other brands, use the rear DC coupling switch with care

Suzanne Vega's 'Ironbound' from *Solitude Standing* [A&M] helped reveal the HMA-6500's strengths and weaknesses. The first thing that struck us was its slight lack of warmth, especially when it came to the guitars, though the percussion sounded brisk and detailed.

The bass at first sounded somewhat mechanical and weak for a model in the 50-75W class. This brought out the midband, giving the impression of a 'grey' tonality and a faint glare around vocals.

On the plus side, treble was neutral and well controlled – there being a good balance struck between dullness and excessive sparkle. And whereas we first found the bass line to sound flat, with other music we slowly became aware of a subsonic landscape that other amplifiers miss completely.

Far from being clipped, the bass is actually properly extended rather than the sort of kick-up that makes you *think* that low frequencies are being dealt with correctly.

'Magical Ring', from Clannad's *Theme From Harry's Game* [RCA], is usually underpinned by a series of deep drones and, although the greater part of these did seem to disappear down the HMA-6500's mid-bass hole, the vocals retained a haunting quality and sounded startlingly transparent when played at an extended volume.

VERDICT

A true classic and representative of the early MOSFET vanguard, Hitachi's HMA-6500 is clearly a powerful and capable amplifier even if its distinctive sound will not be to all tastes. But if you like a tangy taste to your hi-fi you'll love this beautifully made model.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	68W / 74W
Dynamic power (<1-2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	84W / 93W / 51W / 28W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.25–0.30ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz–100kHz, 0dBW)	–0.05dB to –0.8dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/50W)	138mV / 1000mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/50W)	98.0dB / 115.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0008–0.0062%
Power consumption (Idle/rated output)	43W/216W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	435x153x306mm / 9.4kg

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Acoustic Research AR-7

In the 1950s a great step forward was taken in domestic speaker design when audio pioneer Edgar Villchur of Acoustic Research came up with a method of achieving greater bass output from an enclosure far more compact than those already on the market. Not only that but the concept gave lower distortion, too.

Called an 'Acoustic Suspension' speaker, the design did have the disadvantage of being low in efficiency, meaning lower SPLs with amps of the era. But as amplifiers became bigger and more powerful, this was much less of a concern.

The first loudspeakers of this type, the AR-1 and AR-3, became true classics. However, Villchur and his team looked at shrinking their revolutionary design even further. And by 1972 the series had reached the AR-7, a design that could sit neatly on a bookshelf – and was well suited to quadraphonic needs.

The well-proven tweeter from the larger AR-6 was mated to a brand new 8in bass driver using a simple crossover at 2kHz. Both units were housed in a sturdy but compact cabinet weighing 5kg and measuring 400x250x160mm (hwd).

The new bass driver was in many ways a departure for Acoustic Research. A foam surround was used in lieu of treated cloth and a new design of cone, voice coil and motor unit ensured that the acoustic suspension principle would perform optimally in the new cabinet.

The woofer also exhibited a free-air resonance of 25Hz – a remarkably low figure – which gave an overall resonance of 68Hz when mounted in the cabinet. This meant that bass response almost matched that of the larger AR-4x.

Of course, it was not just a reduction in size that prompted the birth of the AR-7, but also a corresponding drop in cost. As a result, the 7's cabinet was finished in vinyl wrap rather than real wood veneer. Gone, too, was the continuously variable tweeter output level control from the AR-4x, which was replaced by a two-position switch: 'Flat' and 'Normal' – though one might not unreasonably assume that flat *is* normal! But this position reduced tweeter output by around 2-3dB above 3kHz.

The AR-7 sold well and was very highly regarded, contemporary reviews praising its 'bite', lack of brashness and impressive bass.

FILLING THE ROOM

With the AR-7s on Atacama SL-600 stands and driven by a Naim Supernait amp we were very impressed by the way they filled our 33x15ft room with sound. They sounded gutsy, punchy and spry from the off, with a surprising level of bass for their size.

'I Can See Clearly Now' from *The Best Of Holly Cole* [Metro Blue] starts with a solidly plucked double-bass line and while the ARs certainly didn't entirely plumb the low frequency depths they more than made up for this with their sheer punch and verve.

> 'The AR-7s seemed to puff up their chests and set proudly to work'

Each note snapped into focus perfectly and when the vocals commenced, the ARs continued to impress. Miss Cole was vivid and well placed within the centre of the soundstage and as the rest of the instrumentation gradually joined in, the AR-7s seemed to puff up their chests and set proudly to work on weaving a pleasingly cohesive overall picture. They never sounded strained or congested, and did a very fine job of keeping all the players easily distinguishable.

At the top end, the ARs gave away their vintage a little more. Although things were clear and nicely detailed, crispness was lacking. Switching to 'Flat' added a little more presence, but the last modicum of sparkle was still rather elusive. That said, with the right material this was less of an issue.



ABOVE: An 8in pulp woofer was specially designed for this small enclosure but AR saved costs by finishing the cabinet in a vinyl wrap. The oatmeal cloth grille was anchored by Velcro

VERDICT

The AR-7 was Acoustic Research's first real attempt to miniaturise its acoustic suspension technology and we'd say the result was spot-on. They wowed the 1970s speaker market and a good pair will likely have the same effect today.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

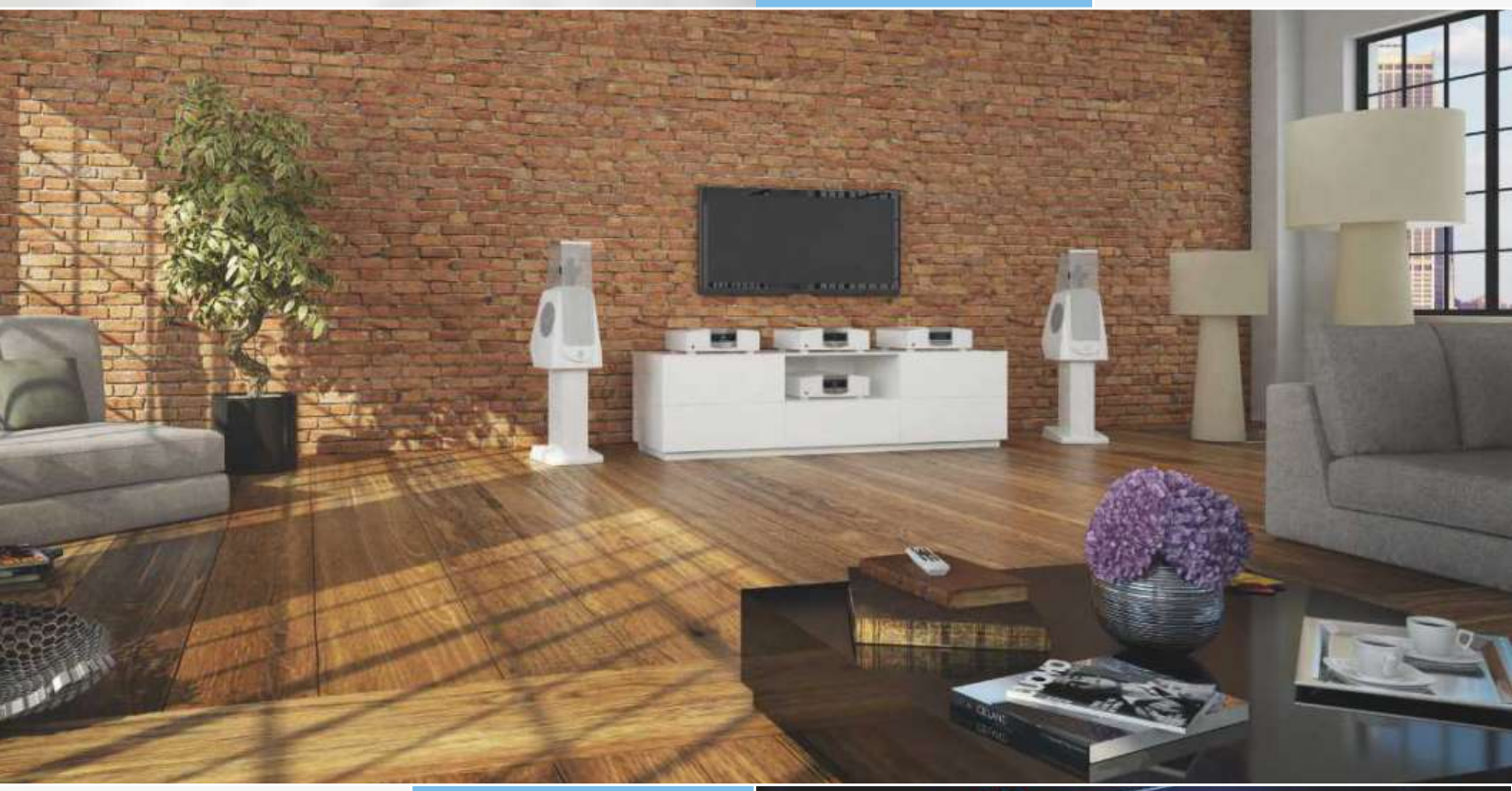
Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	85.4dB/86.2dB/86.0dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.7ohm @ 8.9kHz 12.8ohm @ 68Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–26° @ 87Hz 28° @ 19.7kHz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±12.3dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	55Hz / 32.6kHz/19.7kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.6% / 0.3% / 0.5%
Dimensions (HWD)	400x250x160mm



mbl C21 Stereo Power Amplifier

£6990

The way we listen to music at home can attain more vivid quality if each component in the system fulfils its specific task with top precision whilst working perfectly in tune with the other components. When this is achieved, we experience the breathtaking illusion of the artist standing before us in the flesh, fully captivating our attention. This is why MBL's C11 Preamplifier and C21 Power Amplifiers are synergistic. The C21 utilises MBL's LASA technology in a dedicated stereo chassis. It is the ideal counterpart to the Corona C11 Preamplifier, taking your sound presentation to the next level.



A system's musical potential can only be fully realized with the assistance of a high-grade preamplifier. MBL have invested all their expertise into the development of the Corona Line preamplifier, unimpeded by any constraints, and created a control center adept with any kind of music, down to the very finest detail or each subtle change of mood or timing. To achieve this, MBL designed the C11 around the best available potentiometers for acoustically perfect tracking and volume control. All subassemblies are carefully isolated to prevent interference that could diminish the music's nuances. MBL's uncompromising approach to development makes for superb quality and consummate musical enjoyment.

mbl C11 Premplifier

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mbl C31 CD Player / DAC

£6990

The Corona Line hasn't just broken the mould in design terms alone; technically speaking too it sets new standards. The outer solid aluminium casing contains a second casing of reinforced steel which screens off the electronics in magnetically shielded slots with full electrical isolation of the power supplies units and transformers. The CD player features a state of the art high quality Slot drive and digital RCA and Toslink inputs as well as a native USB dock for CD audio data. A novel intelligent MBL SmartLink network enables the devices to talk to one another. All associated input signals are controlled by the Pre-Amplifier and a simple touch of the button on a device or the remote control is all that you need to put the whole system on standby.

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ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE

Acoustic Signature WOW Turntable

The WOW is one of the newest turntables in the family of Acoustic Signature precision-engineered turntables. It comes with the same proprietary Tidorfolon Bearing design as used in all Acoustic Signature turntables, and with a 10-year warranty. Stunning Design with touch sensor operation so no button is on the clear designed surface. Brand new fully digital motor with a 20Mhz Micro Processor results in perfect speed stability. 4.5kg heavy duty Aluminium platter.

RB202 Tonearm and Audio Technica AT95e Cartridge included.

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Acoustic Signature Barzetti Turntable

The turntable “Barzetti” combines the precision of mass turntables with fresh modern attractive design, clear style, engaging 3D surfaces and soft radii. On a perfectly milled 50mm MDF-chassis Acoustic Signature use a 36mm aluminum platter with more than 6kg weight and the TIDORFOLON Bearing. The internal motor is controlled by their sophisticated motor electronics. As an absolute special The “Barzetti” comes with a 10-layered piano lacquer. This is the highest quality paint on the market with perfect mirror-like surface. The “Barzetti” is delivered in piano black or white or red, and other colors are available for small fee.

£1998





Acoustic Signature Challenger Mk3Turntable

The Challenger turntable weighs in at 23kg, offering you an entry level high mass turntable. With this Challenger design, Acoustic Signature bring together one of the most sophisticated external drive and power supply drive systems, with a massive high mass 50mm thick platter, supported by a solid 40mm thick chassis. The Challenger is incredibly simple to set up, very versatile and sonically its performance is outstanding, making many other brand turntables costing up to three times the price sound poor in comparison. The Challenger design offers a remarkable and consistent performance at a highly competitive price, and has real visual appeal.

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Acoustic Signature Thunder Turntable

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Paul Miller
Editor
Technician and writer on all things audio for some 30 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

Evolution, not revolution

There's been plenty of promise but no seismic shift in hi-fi product design, says **Paul Miller** who sees evolution and subtle feature-creep as 2015's theme. He's got another new job, too...

There was every risk that my Yearbook opinion piece might turn out like one of those awful Christmas card missives where we get to hear about little Johnny's school report card, mum's prowess at the London Marathon and the family's Caribbean holiday. I'll do my best to avoid falling into the trap but it's been one of those years where we've seen the green shoots of evolution, if not outright recovery, from one month to the next.

It was also the year that *Hi-Fi News* resolutely held its own as a 140+ page magazine while others shrank, the year when our Hi-Fi Show *Live* expanded to burst the seams at Beaumont in Windsor and also the year that our European colleagues did your editor the honour of representing EISA as its new President for the 2016 season onwards. Dammit – just couldn't resist being optimistic...



ABOVE: EISA, the unique association of European technology titles, has a new President...

TRICKLE-DOWN TECH

If 2014 was the year that headphones soared from armchair seclusion to must-have street fashion, and prompted the launch of numerous high-end cans to boot, then 2015 has seen this technology trickle down into more affordable headgear and a diversity of partnering electronics.

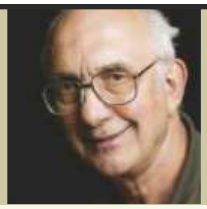
Audeze and Oppo [p79 & 83] both introduced 'entry-level' planar magnetic headphones while other specialised brands, including AudioQuest, felt sufficiently emboldened to launch into what is, for them, an entirely new space [p81]. And, just as so many CD players have morphed into outboard USB DACs with an integral disc drive, so too have standalone USB DACs evolved into headphone preamps with analogue *and* digital inputs. These range from portable hub-powered devices like the DragonFly, which kicked-off this revolution, to fully-fledged separates including Quad's valve-powered PA-One [p75] and Simaudio's fully balanced Moon 430HA [p77]. The minimalist USB-in/RCA-out DAC intended to marry your PC/Mac with your hi-fi system has all but disappeared, this technology having now grown into USB/network-enabled DACs like the 851N from Cambridge Audio [p41] and Naim NAC N-272 [p47] as well as very specialised music storage/players like the N1A from Japan's Melco [p43].

> 'USB DACs have evolved into headphone preamps with digital inputs'

We've seen a real resurgence in sublimely engineered turntables too, from a new Rega [p27] and SME [p29] to the TechDAS Air Force 2 and VPI Prime [p30 & 33] although perhaps my most memorable auditions were loudspeakers, including hearing the limited edition Magico M Project and Focal Sopra N°2 floorstanders [p89]. The latter turned out to be no less impressive when installed in *chez Ed* – they may not have quite the bass extension of my resident B&W 802Ds, but the holographic quality of their imaging is truly spine-tingling. Ironically, just as I thought the 802s might have met a worthy competitor, B&W has announced an entirely revamped 'D3' 800-series...

HEAR IT *LIVE*

B&W's new 800-series loudspeakers will formally roll-out after our Hi-Fi Show *Live* in October at Windsor but I can promise you the first full technical review of the D3 version of its iconic 802 floorstander immediately after [*HFN* Dec '15]. In the meantime you can experience the sheer scale and impact offered by the highest high-end systems by treating your ears to a day, or even a full weekend, at our Windsor-based Show [see p16] where numerous of the products in this Yearbook will be featured. I look forward to greeting many of you there.



Barry Fox
Technology journalist
Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

The real masterstroke

Stereo soundbars, the death of Blu-ray and CD, the attraction of streaming to the music industry and mixed experiences with Windows 10... **Barry Fox** casts a wary eye over the past 12 months

When Klipsch recently let slip that an Atmos soundbar was on the drawing board, it just confirmed what anyone with half a memory of the AV world has been predicting. Surround sound for music has been launched, failed, re-launched and failed many times over the last 50 years. AV '5.1 in a box' surround has dead-ended in the same way. It's all just too much trouble for the mass market with 'real world' homes.

Immersive surround, needing yet more speakers – some of them Voices of God in the ceiling or cluttering the room to fire up at the ceiling – is yet more hassle. That's why stereo soundbars, with some optional phase distortion to spread the image wider, sell so well. An immersive soundbar which squirts sound up at the ceiling might even sell, too. But just don't call it hi-fi or pretend it enhances the music experience.



RIGHT: Joe Belfiore, corporate vice president of the Windows and Devices Group, addresses Microsoft employees at a rally in Seattle as the company announced Windows 10

NO JACKET REQUIRED

The music industry has done sterling work this year in killing off CD and DVD and Blu-ray Pure Audio. Streams and downloads are a better way for them to sell the same music (and movies) all over again. No factories are needed for production. No warehousing is necessary and no man with van deliveries. The customer pays to receive, in broadband fees. And with no sleeve notes required there's no need to pay someone who knows about music to write anything informative.

Some of what passed as progress in 2015 will not be everyone's idea of progress. I heard a music track I liked ('Since I Fell For You', by Dinah Washington) on the radio and thought that I'd buy it. A krutty MP3 download costs 99p. Not so long ago it was just one of a 100 or so carefully transferred tracks on one of the wonderful Proper Records' 4CD box sets that cost £12 and came with a booklet packed with facts and pictures.

I use two fixed-line broadband accounts, one unlimited and one capped at 40GB. After a couple of teenagers with mobiles visited for a few days, my capped usage had gone from near zero to near max.

The mobile networks now encourage us to do without a fixed phone line. I recently stayed in a house with only a mobile data connection. Data speed measured 0.01Mb/s for download with upload unmeasurable. Just try streaming music with that.

> 'The year brought mixed blessings for anyone who uses a PC to store music'

The music industry's real masterstroke has been to progress towards a future where there is no secondhand. Until now we have been able to lend, give, borrow and buy tapes and discs. There is no process for doing the same with either streams or downloads. Technically it's far more difficult to pass on digitally stored content; logistically it's a nightmare to separate, label and index whatever is buried inside a multi-gigabyte memory or computer disc store.

It's generally illegal too, especially after a UK High Court decision in July, which confirmed we have no right to make copies of what we have bought.

NERVE WRENCHING

The year brought mixed blessings for anyone who uses a PC to store and network music. Microsoft launched Windows 10 and is encouraging us all to upgrade for free.

Upgrading to Windows 10 proved to be a long and nerve-wrenching experience. On one PC the upgrade failed with an error message that must go down in history as Microsoft's most unhelpful ever – 'Something happened – Close'. After a successful upgrade, various programs like AOL email, which previously worked, no longer functioned.

All this will be quite literally music to the ears of all those companies now selling home music store and network systems that don't involve a computer. Twenty-sixteen should be a very good year for them. And it should also be a good year for people like me who now scour the secondhand shops and bargain bins for CDs that the music industry wants us to stop buying.



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Christopher Breunig
Music Journalist
Christopher Breunig trained as an architect but became won over by music and collecting classical recordings. He was *Hi-Fi News*' Music Editor from 1986-2000

Vinyl resurgence

Christopher Breunig is happy enough to find many classical recordings are coming out again (or for the first time) on vinyl, but wonders how younger listeners really get on with a turntable

When I was compiling the Yearbook Classical reviews pages I found more than one instance of Universal introducing a 96kHz/24-bit download option when at first a new release would only be listed as on CD. Before buying, it's worth checking at *http://umusicdirect.com/classics*.

Presto Classical's website invariably suggests a wider range of current choices for a given work than some other selling sites, and the download option (together with listening examples) is always given for all labels.

AUDIOPHILE VINYL

Another area which Universal seems to be exploring more and more now is vinyl transfers of classic Decca recordings – the Solti Mahler *Eighth Symphony* [4788551], the Ansermet Ravel *Daphnis Et Chloé*, the VPO/Karajan *Nutcracker*/*Peer Gynt* Suites [4788556] the magical Hérold/Lanchberry *La Fille Mal Gardée* [4788555], were all announced in August (again, see *umusicdirect*).

Formerly, to find these you had to go to Speakers Corner, but they are at present transferring CBS/Sony recordings – although they also list some of the old RCA 'Living Stereo' LPs on the Acoustic Sounds label, and it's good to find Reiner, Munch, Heifetz, *et al*, newly transferred at 200g, after the disappearance here of the Classic Records catalogue.



ABOVE: Universal is expanding its vinyl catalogue – as with this box reviewed in June

Interested collectors really have to be vigilant, as these LPs don't usually get sent out by the companies and the final curtain falling on the magazine *Classical Recordings Quarterly* this spring means even fewer published reviews appearing. It's a shame you can't track each month's new classical releases on all the record companies' websites!

Clearly, there must still be a demand for classical vinyl (the 'grey pound' perhaps?), with the provision of expensive boxed sets like the Decca monos I wrote about in Classical Companion [*HFN* Jun '15], Piano Concertos with Argerich and Abbado [4794548] and the 1952-5 Anthony Collins Sibelius symphonies with the LSO [4788497]. The former includes the recent Beethoven 2/3 with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Mozart's K466/503 with Abbado's Orchestra Mozart (also separately available on 4793601). I'm really tempted by this 6LP set, even at £75, as my Ace Of Clubs pressings are missing half of the cycle (though I have the CDs issued by Beulah, 14PD8, superseded now by Decca's box-set 478 8589 which adds other remastered Sibelius).

> 'You hope your Mac Preferences haven't forgotten which DAC you have connected'

GOING DOWN MEMORY LANE?

I was also tempted after reading our review of the Rega RP10 turntable [p27] to pension off my old LP12, with its wobbly subchassis (although it's finally stopped sagging after time, with my last set of springs). Steve Harris also wrote [Opinion, Oct '15] about the mystique of vinyl replay, versus the developments with digital marketing. The tactile experience of unsleeving the LP in that fine glazed cover is something you just can't match with scrolling through a long list of music files on a laptop, and hoping your Mac Preferences haven't forgotten which DAC you have connected!



PHOTO: EUROARTS

ABOVE: Martha Argerich's piano concerto recordings with Abbado are now all on vinyl

In fact our reprint of an article on the best and worst of classical LP sleeves [*HFN* May '15] prompted an unusually large reader response. Obviously part of the appeal of these remastered Deccas and DGs is just nostalgia – why else, for instance, would I want to go back to those mono Sibelius symphonies, when I can listen to Davis, Oramo or Vänskä?

You do wonder how younger listeners *really* react to turntable replay. After all, those sudden patches of noise and the likelihood of static lifting the mat with the record, and sliding sideways towards your costly stylus tip, *can* make it all a bit nerve-wracking.



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Barry Willis
Journalist for top American audio-video publications
While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

Advancements and retreats

It was the year Bluetooth for music came into its own and musicians began to bite back at Apple. Meanwhile, interest in the ol' black stuff saw a raft of new, yet affordable, kit, says **Barry Willis**

To the surprise of many audio industry veterans, the vinyl resurgence continues to gain momentum, with several new or refurbished record plants now in round-the-clock operation. Meanwhile, quality equipment makers are rolling out turntables in numbers not seen since the last gasp of the analogue era.

Stalwart brands such as Rega, Thorens, and Music Hall are delivering great-sounding and great-looking tables (in colours!) to a whole new generation of music lovers, supported by old-line cartridge makers such as Ortofon, whose much-praised stalwart 2M Red moving-magnet cartridge retails for only $100.

It's now possible – likely, even – that music lovers can enjoy extremely satisfying analogue playback at a reasonable entry fee.

CUSTOM BUILDERS

This year has also seen a renewed interest in high-performance direct-drive technology as exemplified by VPI's Classic Direct Drive ($30k) with a 'cogless' motor built by Thin Gap of Ventura, California.

Custom builders are also going in for direct drive in a big way. One such is Peter Noerbaek of San Diego-based PBN Audio, whose beautiful custom tables are based on vintage Denon motor/platter assemblies ('best ever made', he claims), which he completely repopulates with new capacitors before installing stunning hardwood bases fitted with SME arms.



ABOVE: Upmarket vinyl playback for the masses – Ortofon's 2M Red MM cartridge

What we haven't seen, other than DJ tables available in pro music shops, is a return by other great Japanese brands of the 1970s and '80s: Micro-Seiki, JVC, Pioneer, Kenwood. And while record bins full of new and reissued vinyl have sprung up in unlikely retail locations, the discouraging news is that they are usually accompanied by the cheesiest possible cheap plastic record players.

It is the duty of every audiophile to discourage friends from buying these things. They would have been abominable 40 years ago; today they are beyond intolerable. Say 'no' to poor performance!

In the digital audio arena, 2015 was the year that Bluetooth wireless technology finally came into its own. In mid-summer, I heard two knockout demonstrations that put all doubts to rest. One was from an iPad playing Apple Lossless files to a prototype one-piece Class-D integrated amp; the other, from a recent-production LG smartphone playing WAV files to a prototype Bluetooth streamer feeding an all-valve amplification chain.

> 'Discourage friends from buying these things. Say "no" to poor performance'

In both cases the performances were exemplary – sonically transparent and musically evocative.

With tremendous bandwidth and up to 32-bit depth, Bluetooth avoids Wi-Fi's handshaking protocols and has proven itself (at least to me) as the clear 21st century solution for short-range wireless performance. Bluetooth is no longer simply a convenient way to make your smartphone talk to your car's dashboard.



ABOVE: Peter Noerbaek of PBN Audio

Old school audiophiles may scoff, but it's truly a high-fidelity technology.

CORE DECISION

On the musical performance front, the most interesting news of the year was pop star Taylor Swift's confrontation with Apple, in which she refused to lend her recordings to a promotional programme that withheld payments to artists during an iTunes trial subscription period. 'We don't ask you for free iPhones,' Swift posted, 'Why should you ask us for free music?' With more money than most nations in the world, Apple agreed to pay, in an obviously beneficial public relations move.

For musicians there's still almost no revenue in streaming. According to a mid-August National Public Radio report on the subject, superstar Pharrell Williams netted only about $2000 from 'Happy', one of 2014's biggest hits. The real money is in concert tickets – a boon for the likes of Swift and Williams, who sell out sports arenas year-round. Thousands of lesser-known talents are still hoping to support themselves with their art.

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Jim Lesurf
Science Journalist
Jim Lesurf has spent a lifetime in audio, both as an engineer at UK hi-fi company Armstrong and reader in Physics and Electronics at St Andrew's University

Armstrong back in the frame

While developments around the BBC iPlayer and advances in USB DACs were highlights of the year for **Jim Lesurf**, it was the revamp of a 40-year-old amp that provided the true high point

Politicians and admen often use terms such as 'new' and 'modern' as if they were synonyms for 'better'. Sometimes what they want to sell you is an improvement. But there are other occasions when they're just using these words as pretty labels to stick on the box. And sometimes, upon investigation, you might well discover that you prefer something 'old'. My personal audio highlight of 2015 happened just a few weeks ago. But it's based on something from a past millennium!



ABOVE: For in-depth information on the Armstrong 626 and modifications to the author's own amplifier, navigate to *www.audiomisc.co.uk/armstrong/626updated/repairandmod.html*

REALLY STYLISH

After years of dithering, I finally decided to send my 1970s Armstrong 626 tuner-amplifier to be serviced and modified by Mike Solomons of London Sound [see *www.londonsound.org*]. When returned, unpacked from the carton and hooked back into my system, I fired it up. What I heard impressed me so much that it set me wondering about 'new versus old' when it comes to home audio. Using a pair of LS3/5A loudspeakers, the 626 delivers thoroughly enjoyable music. What's more, the set-up also looks really stylish.

OK, I admit to being somewhat biased because I worked for Armstrong Audio when it was making the 600 range. Back then I did make some changes to production 600 units, improving their performance. But some unresolved quirks remained, which I never got around to tackling. Mike's modifications dealt with these neatly.

As time has passed, better electronic devices and components have become available, and the skills and methods available for engineers have grown. I've always tended to keep up, learning, using new test and analysis methods, and so on. So I don't feel I'm a fuddy-duddy reactionary who regards the past as a fabled 'golden age'. I know very well that modern components and methods have produced technical improvements and excellent kit that we could only have dreamed of in the 1970s.

To be honest, back then I took for granted that by the 21st century no-one would still be using such old equipment. However despite all that I've always had a soft spot for the 600 range. And it has become quite clear from the many emails I've had over the years that I'm certainly not alone.

> 'I regret that it's taken decades to have modifications added to the design'

The surviving 600s are an example of designs that seem to have developed a 'classic' status. And – like vinyl – they have survived and remain loved long past their predicted demise!

The snag, though, is that age and wear do tend to mean that old equipment sometimes needs some TLC. Fortunately there are a few specialists, such as Mike, who can meet that challenge.

My 626 and LS3/5As are for a secondary system I use in my home office. My main hi-fi system uses the more 'modern' Armstrong 700 amplifiers driving Quad 2805 speakers. I do regard both these amplifiers and speakers as superior to those in my secondary system, but of course, the 700 amplifiers were developed at the start of the 1980s and hence aren't much younger than the 600 range. And even the 2805s are essentially improved ESL63s!

For me, the most significant 'new' developments in recent years have centred around the ability to play high-resolution files and the BBC iPlayer, using computer set-ups via a USB DAC. The analogue side of audio seems to be one where I find I am still quite happy to enjoy using equipment designed and built decades ago.

BEST FROM BOTH

Is it simply that I am old fashioned and 'vintage' myself? I don't think so. I feel the reality is that some old equipment simply goes on sounding – and looking – good. Hence, so far as the 600 range is concerned, my only regret is that it has taken decades to have Mike Solomon's modifications added to the design. Indeed, now that I can combine new with old and play high-resolution files and Radio 3 from the BBC iPlayer as well as FM, I can really appreciate just how good the results can be.

So in some cases 'old' might be a synonym for 'vintage', 'classic' or even 'great'. And combining old with new, we can all now obtain the best from both!

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Andrew Everard
Reviewer/writer

Andrew Everard has reviewed consumer electronics for over 30 years and is still effortlessly enthusiastic about new developments, discovering new kit – and music

A delightful revival

This is looking like a year that promised much yet delivered very little, says **Andrew Everard**, but a number of discoveries (and rediscoveries) have so far managed to keep him entertained...

I'm getting (even) more cynical about the continuous onslaught of new/reinvented/rebranded music streaming services, and the technology behind them. The great Tidal relaunch turned out to be a star-studded embarrassment, with a lot of idealism being spouted about putting the means of distribution in the hands of the creative artists, seizing back the spirit of creative expression and so on.

That's a pity because I'm a great fan of Tidal's aims of delivering lossless streaming, but given the egos involved I can't help feeling this is a car-crash waiting to happen.



ABOVE: This year saw Ken Ishiwata mark 30 years of tuning Marantz products with the release of the matching £1799 apiece Marantz SA SACD player and PM-14S1 SE integrated amplifier

PRETTY POOR

So, Apple Music, then: I was amused to see press reports hailing 11m sign-ups to the service within a month of its launch, and the comment of Eddy Cue, Apple's senior vice president of Internet software and services, that 'We're thrilled with the numbers so far.' OK, so there's an element of talking the service up, but my immediate reaction was 'Is that it?'

Just 11m worldwide sign-ups to a free trial service sounds pretty poor to me, but then so does Apple Music itself, hamstrung by its 256kb/s AAC format, and thus in the same ballpark as the current Spotify service. Just for once, it seems Apple's ability to do something able to redefine a market sector has slipped, and there's a danger that Apple Music will become just another 'me too' service.

As the streaming services come thick and fast, each offering no more than tidbits of unique content to attract the curious, surely a major shakedown looms on the horizon. Will users really keep a fistful of subscriptions going, just to be able to flick between them to find the morsels they're seeking? Doesn't that kind of defeat the whole 'world of music at your fingertips' idea of streaming services?

It has all the hallmarks of those format wars fought in the audio world over the years and we all know how those tend to pan out. However big the guns rolled out by the opposing sides, wars eventually have losers.

> 'It's the best £100 or so I've spent on my system for as long as I can remember'

On which subject, I'm viewing with some delight the revival of the DSD format, both in big-money streaming hardware and highly affordable pocket players and DACs. I've recently upgraded my reference Naim NDS network player to DSD capability, having been tempted by the excellent performance of the company's NAC-N272 streaming preamp [*HFN* May '15], and I have to admit to having been blown away by the Ken Ishiwata-tuned Marantz SA-14S1 and PM-14S1 Special Edition player/DAC and amplifier [*HFN* Oct '15].

Having spent a day listening with him and talking matters audio and digital, it's clear that after more than three decades with the company, Ishiwata has still 'got it' when it comes to designing fine-sounding products, and is still exploring both new musical avenues and technological side-turnings in his search for ever-better sound.

BENEFITS OF FIBRE

Mind you, I'm not sure what he made of my new-found interest in the sonic benefits of fibre-optic network connections between music storage and network players [see *http://tinyurl.com/aefibre*]. I'm not trying it for network speed but for improved isolation between noisy NAS units and the audio electronics of high-end streamers and I've been amazed how much difference it can make. It's certainly the best £100 or so I've spent on my system for as long as I can remember.



Tim Jarman
Electronics Engineer
Tim Jarman has been repairing and collecting vintage hi-fi for over 20 years. He is an authority on both classic B&O equipment and the Sony Walkman series

The price is right

Pound-conscious audiophiles will find plenty to please in the vintage market thanks to an absence of fixed values, and deals to be done. Which is where brochures come in handy, says **Tim Jarman**

There is more to the vintage audio scene than the hoarding of vast piles of glittering relics – although that has an important part to play. Research and context play a part too. Unless you are content to stick to only the most popular and best-known models then eventually you are bound to stumble across something from a forgotten corner of a manufacturer's range about which little, if even the most basic of specifications, is known.

This is where old catalogues and brochures are invaluable. You'll find boxes of these at any audio fair or radio rally, usually under the tables and normally offered at negligible cost – although some hi-fi sales literature is now considered collectable in its own right and so can cost a little more. Anything which relates to the equipment that you have, admire or aspire to own should be considered an essential purchase.



ABOVE: Original brochures from Quad, Sony, Lecson and Leak – just some of the brands featured in our Vintage Reviews over the years and a minefield of information for bargain vintage hunters

SERIOUS PLAYERS

During hi-fi's 'vintage' period, lavishly produced full-colour catalogues became a must. Not only did a quality brochure confirm a manufacturer's status as a serious player, it also allowed its whole range to be displayed and described in the most economical manner.

> 'One of the units in our Vintage Reviews section cost us less than a pint of beer'

Some of the big names produced so many models each year that it would have been impractical for any dealer to stock the full range. A choice of ten amplifiers and 30 assorted source components would not have been unusual, each slightly different in ways that only a carefully written catalogue could hope to describe.

With this information in your hands you can quickly determine during which period your equipment was on sale, roughly where it fitted into the pecking order of components, what extras the more expensive versions offered and which other units were suggested as additions to complete the system.

The technical data is also useful, but bear in mind that there were many measurement standards in use at this time, so making direct comparisons between different ranges is an activity full of pitfalls, especially when considering amplifier power and cassette frequency response.

Another mistake is to set one's heart on a particular model, having seen it in an old brochure. Ideal it may be, but these publications give no indication of how popular each variant was and how many were produced or imported. Often, just a few choices dominate the bulk of sales and the rest slip quietly into obscurity.

In the case of my own favourite marques, there are some models which I have never seen, despite their almost identical bedfellows being commonplace to the point of distraction. Still, there can be few more pleasant ways to pass time over the Christmas break than thumbing through old catalogues and magazines, planning ones 'want' and 'need' lists for the New Year's buying campaign.

BEER MONEY

A feature of the current vintage hi-fi movement which is attractive is the absence of an agreed structure of values for the vast bulk of equipment. The classic car market does have a generally accepted list of values for most models and, while that can sometimes bring clarity, it does mean that these days there are few (if any) bargains to be had in that sphere. Hi-fi is different since at present there remain plenty of covetable components to go round and still no broad consensus on what most of them are worth, meaning that at almost every exchange there is a deal to be done.

As a case in point, one of the units featured in our Vintage Review section this past year was bought at an organised event for its full asking price, which was less than the cost of a pint of beer. Nevertheless, the unit in question was working and went on to perform well. I won't spoil things by saying which component it was though!



Keith Howard

Audio and technical journalist

Keith Howard has been writing about all things audio since 1978. Best described as part scientist, part engineer, Keith performs our speaker and headphone lab tests

The best of modern audio

While the sheer number of new headphones on the market in 2015 made it difficult for the true masters of the art to shine, says **Keith Howard**, the year belonged to Meridian and its MQA tech

On the big stage of the global audio industry I will always remember 2015 as the year when MQA (Master Quality Authenticated) properly broke cover. To be strictly accurate we knew it was coming – though not what it was called – in mid-2014 and it was officially launched shortly before Christmas.

But 2015 was the year I first heard MQA in circumstances worthy of it (the demonstration room at Meridian Audio's HQ in Huntingdon as opposed to a long way up in The Shard) and it is surely the year that will seal its fate as it achieves, or fails to achieve, critical mass. I sincerely hope it's the former.



RIGHT: Andrew Luckham, International Sales Consultant at Meridian Audio demonstrates the company's MQA technology at the Stockholm High End Show in February this year. Speakers are the MQA-ready DSP5200SE

TURNING POINTS

I'm now two years away from clocking up four decades as a hi-fi journalist yet I can't recall ever being so excited by a new technology. The arrival of CD in 1982/83 was a major event, of course – a turning point in the history of audio – but it will forever be soured in my memory by the grim sound quality offered up by early players and discs. In retrospect, it was the inauspicious start of a journey that has at long last culminated in MQA.

Significant milestones along the route were Wadia's emphasis on the time-domain performance of digital filters, Pioneer's double-speed DAT recorders that gave us a first hint of the benefits of higher sampling rate, the arrival of DVD-A and SACD, Peter Craven's work on apodising filters and, most recently, the establishment of hi-res downloads as a means for quality-hungry audiophiles to buy music. It might appear a logical progression, only it wasn't that at all – there were naysayers at every juncture.

> 'When it comes to MQA I can't recall being so excited by a new technology'

As there are with MQA, of course: some people just aren't happy unless they're complaining, vociferously, that they're being hoodwinked or ripped off, often both. There was a time when I would have attempted to change the opinions of those who have serially accused me and others of like mind of being gullible, naïve, stupid or, perhaps worst of all, corrupt. Nowadays I don't give a toss. If people are – from my perspective – foolish enough to forgo what the best of modern audio design and technology can provide, it's their loss.

For readers of *HFN* who are relative newcomers to the maelstrom that is high-end audio and who, quite reasonably, feel torn about the benefits or otherwise of hi-res digital having read some plonker in the national newspapers declaring them illusory, I would simply counsel this. Listen to the recordings of artisans like, say, George Massenburg or Tony Faulkner, who work with live and recorded sound almost daily, and ask yourself this: would these people, who have a proven track record of striving for and achieving fine recorded sound and who are enthusiasts for hi-res digital, know more or less about what it delivers than an charabanc full of audio academics and armchair experts who can claim no such experience and no such intimate exposure to live versus recorded sound? Answer that question sensibly and you'll be in a good place to assess the nonsense often promulgated on this subject.

HEADPHONE HIGHS

Elsewhere, I continue to agonise over the trajectory of the headphone industry. The downside of the shot in the arm given it by the burgeoning popularity of listening on the move is that many more players have entered the field and too many of them, to be frank, haven't the first idea what they're about.

It is all too common for me to experience headphones that have manifest colorations only to find them being lauded in reviews that, through their enthusiasm, make it even more difficult for those who truly understand the art of headphone design to receive due recognition. But there *were* high points in my headphone listening this year: the Aurorasound Heada headphone amp [*HFN* May '15]. Bliss!



Steve Harris
Contributing Editor
Steve Harris edited *Hi-Fi News* between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

Time and money

Events in 2015 have **Steve Harris** taking a fresh look at the past. Who could have predicted a vinyl rebirth or forseen classical concert halls saved with money from the golden age of rock?

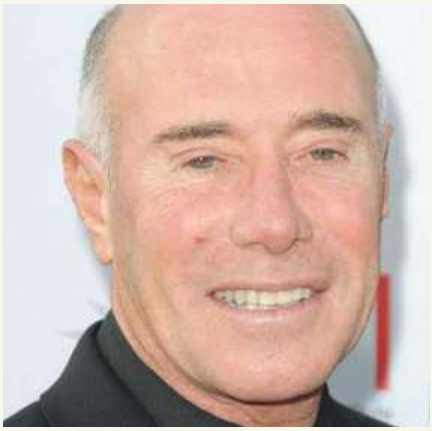
A year for all formats, perhaps? Hi-res PCM digital audio, the standard of the professional audio world, has also become the enthusiast's standard for domestic hi-fi. You can sample alternative flavours too, with downloads in DSD, the '1 bit' recording format behind SACD.

But above all, 2015 has been a year in which there was no longer just a vinyl revival, or even a vinyl boom. It's now more like a vinyl explosion.

Early in the year, I happened on the late Ed Dell's little book *Of Mockingbirds And Other Irrelevancies* [see Opinion, June '15], a collection of the *Audio Amateur* magazine editorials he'd written between 1970 and 1992.

Dell was an astute observer in the early days of digital audio, but even he couldn't have begun to envisage the transformation that was coming. Or indeed the resurgence of vinyl.





ABOVE: Laura Nyro (left) and David Geffen set up Tuna Fish Music, selling it in 1969 for $4.9m

BAD ACOUSTICS

On another tack, writing in 1975 Dell discussed the problems of New York's Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center. Both the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Boston Symphony had just announced that they would no longer use the hall. 'The reason? Bad acoustics.'

> 'There was no longer just a vinyl revival, or even a vinyl boom. It's now a vinyl explosion'

Nearly 40 years on, the Avery Fisher Hall still faced huge problems, needing to find $500 million for a complete renovation. In November 2014, the Lincoln Center announced that it would offer the naming rights of the Hall to the highest bidder, reportedly after paying off the Fisher family to the tune of $15 million. A new sponsor was found, and the venue is now the David Geffen Hall.

In the mid-1960s, David Geffen was the great mover and shaker of the amazing Laurel Canyon scene, steering Crosby Stills & Nash to Atlantic, for example. He became a millionaire at the age of 26 by selling the publishing company he'd started with Laura Nyro to CBS. He made several more millions in 1972 by selling his Asylum Records company to Warner.

In 1980, he founded Geffen Records, which then became part of MCA, and ultimately made Geffen a billionaire when MCA was bought by Matshushita in 1991.

In the 1990s he launched DGC Records, which recorded Beck, Nirvana and Sonic Youth. But he also became a co-founder of the film production company DreamWorks, with director Steven Spielberg and ex-Disney chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg.

Long before all that, Geffen's amazing career began when, after dropping out of college, he worked briefly as an usher at CBS television, and then famously landed a job in the mailroom at the William Morris Agency after falsely claiming on his resumé that he had graduated from UCLA.

As he told an interviewer [for 92Y Plus/*Business Week*] 'The funny thing was that none of the people... who started the William Morris agency... had ever been to school, but they required everyone in the mailroom to have been to college.'

TERRIBLE BATTLE

Writing about the Fisher Hall in 1975, Ed Dell said: 'Some of us can remember the terrible battle that had to be waged to save Carnegie Hall from being bulldozed into rubble. Ironically, the willingness of rock groups to use the old edifice tipped the balance on financial feasibility. The older building's acoustics are now likely to put it in the black.'

So Carnegie Hall survived, and in fact the main auditorium was later named after Isaac Stern in recognition of the violinist's efforts to save the hall in the 1960s. If Ed Dell was still with us, he would probably be amused to note that New York's other great classical concert hall has been saved, in another sense, by money generated originally in the golden age of rock.

But we shouldn't be surprised. So much of the music from that era is still bankable in 2015, in any format.

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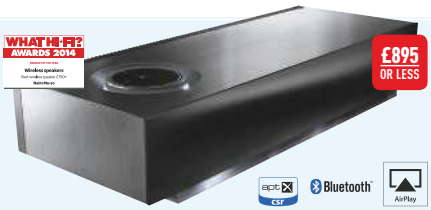
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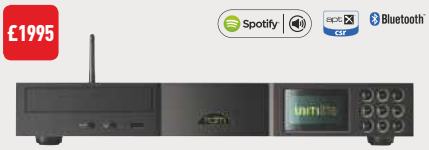
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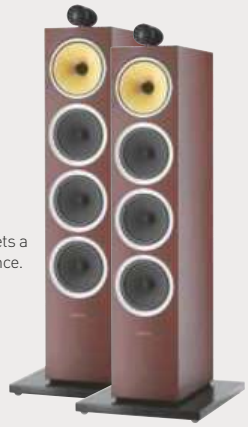


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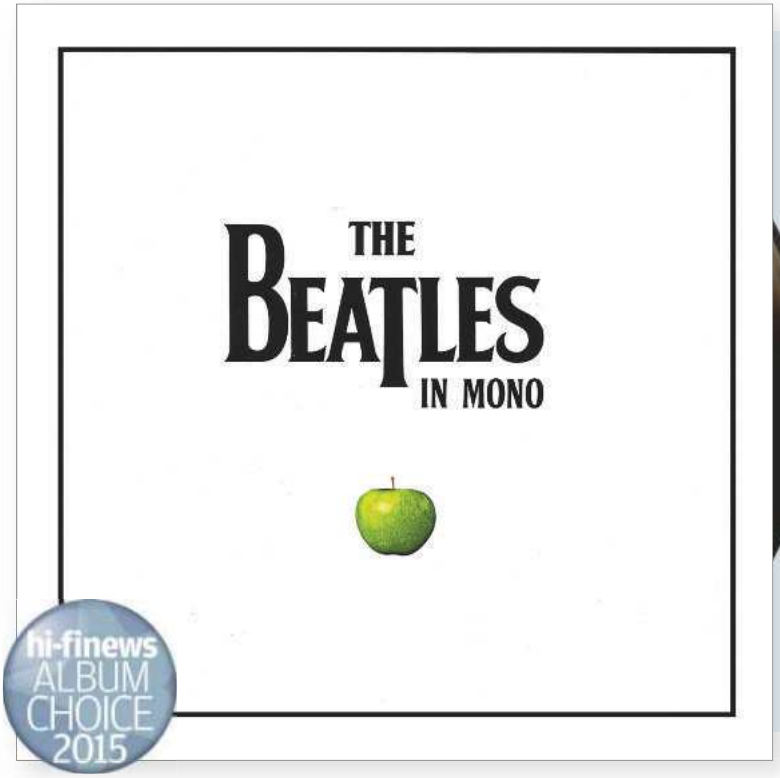
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AUDIOPHILE: VINYL



THE BEATLES
In Mono

Apple 099963 378716 (14 LPs)

A no-brainer? Perhaps, because The Beatles are the greatest rock/pop band of all-time, period. However, following the stereo LPs box controversy, with mixes taken from digital transfers, this avoids a contretemps by being purely analogue. And it sounds it, too. I compared the LPs with mint originals, as did other reviewers, and agree with the consensus that this most important of formats – The Beatles themselves regarded mono as *the* medium – sounds different enough from the originals to keep pundits busy, but the results are utterly illuminating... and wholly positive. The material is beyond criticism. The sound? So much better than you had *ever* hoped it might be. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



THE GRATEFUL DEAD
American Beauty

Mobile Fidelity MFSL2-429 (two 45rpm LPs)

This is a giant American 'hero' band I just don't get. However, this is one of their more accessible, post-too-much-acid releases and one that was a key element in reviving roots music, foreshadowing alt.country and other genres of a more musical bent. What's undeniable is musicianship of an order that leaves one breathless. From the plaintive to the easy-going, this 1970 follow-up to the equally-accessible *Workingman's Dead*, the album is a feast of country-style pickin' to embarrass any Mumford. Also out on SACD, this 45rpm version has sonic value to dazzle audiophiles and Deadheads. (Footnote: I worshipped the New Riders Of The Purple Sage. Go figure.) *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



NINA SIMONE
Folksy Nina

Pure Pleasure PPAN SCP 465 (180g vinyl)

Yeah, I had to laugh at the title, because – overall – folksy she ain't. But this unusual release from 1964 finds the versatile, enigmatic jazz chanteuse moving with the times, the USA then on the tail-end of a frenzy of folk music (being squeezed by British pop bands). Simone, to be fair, was always eclectic, and never strayed too far from blues or gospel influences. Recorded in Carnegie Hall in May '63, it features her with a drum/bass/two guitar backing and her own exquisite piano playing, covering folks tunes from the USA, Great Britain, Israel and other cultures, delivered in her own, inimitable style. The sound quality is utterly sublime. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



SARAH VAUGHAN
The Divine One

Pure Pleasure PPAN SR52060 (180g vinyl)

Many years ago I gave up trying to create a pecking order for the great vocalists – Ella vs Dinah vs Peggy, *etc* – because Sarah Vaughan always tipped the balance with LPs like this masterpiece recorded in 1960. From her brief span with Roulette, it's simply exquisite: a small group arranged by Jimmy Jones, with Harry 'Sweets' Edison on trumpet, Jones on piano... The trumpet playing, for example, on 'What Do You See In Her?' shows interplay that makes this the kind of set that defines intimate jazz vocals. She concentrates here on quiet, moody ballads, but there are moments like 'Jump For Joy' that swing like nothing else. Good pressings from Pure Pleasure too. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



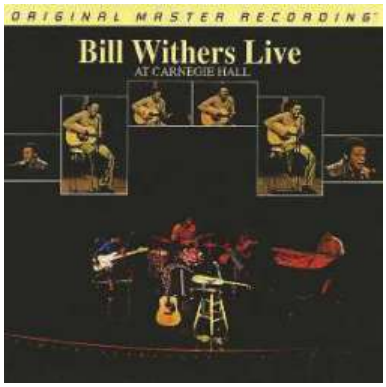
THE TURTLES
45rpm Vinyl Singles Collection

FloEdCo/Manifestor Records MFO 48030 (eight singles)

February's 'Album Choice' going to a box set of eight 7in/45rpm singles? Really? Let's look at the evidence. The eight singles feature 16 A-sides, though three or four are semi-obscure. The rest are staggering pop classics like 'You Baby', 'Happy Together', 'She'd Rather Be With Me' and others penned by the likes of Bob Dylan, Nilsson, Jim McGuinn and Gene Clark, Warren Zevon, P F Sloan, and Bonner and Gordon. The Turtles were as polished as *any* 1960s act, but underappreciated until they broke up and singers Kaylan and Volman were grabbed by Frank Zappa. This is some of the finest sunshine pop ever, and you won't believe how good vinyl 45s can sound. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



BILL WITHERS
Live At Carnegie Hall

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-446 2x180g LPs

Live funk at Carnegie Hall, circa '73? How can you resist? The super-sexy soul singer who gave us 'Lean On Me', 'Ain't No Sunshine', 'Grandma's Hands' and other memorable classics presents these with wonderful intros, followed by performances with intimacy that belie the venue's immensity. Fourteen tracks over two LPs, they sound so vivid that this ought to rank with the sets by the Weavers and Harry Belafonte at the same site: open, airy, authentic. 'Lean On Me' will make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck – not least because the audience is so appreciative. Note for audiophiles: the clapping is so real it's *scary. KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



LED ZEPPELIN
Physical Graffiti

Swan Song R2-544660 (three LPs + three CDs)

This 1975 release is regarded by some as Led Zep's greatest. It is, however, an oddity, consisting of eight fresh tracks plus unreleased performances from earlier LPs. Bands usually do not mix outtakes with new recordings, but the primary eight ran longer than a single LP, so they chose to expand it with bonus material. Even so, Led Zep's leftovers are fascinating and worthy, with an outtake from *Led Zeppelin III*, three from *Led Zeppelin IV* and three from *Houses Of The Holy*. Part of their overkill repackaging series, this contains the album on double vinyl and double CD, with a bonus CD and LP containing studio outtakes, plus a 96-page hardback. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

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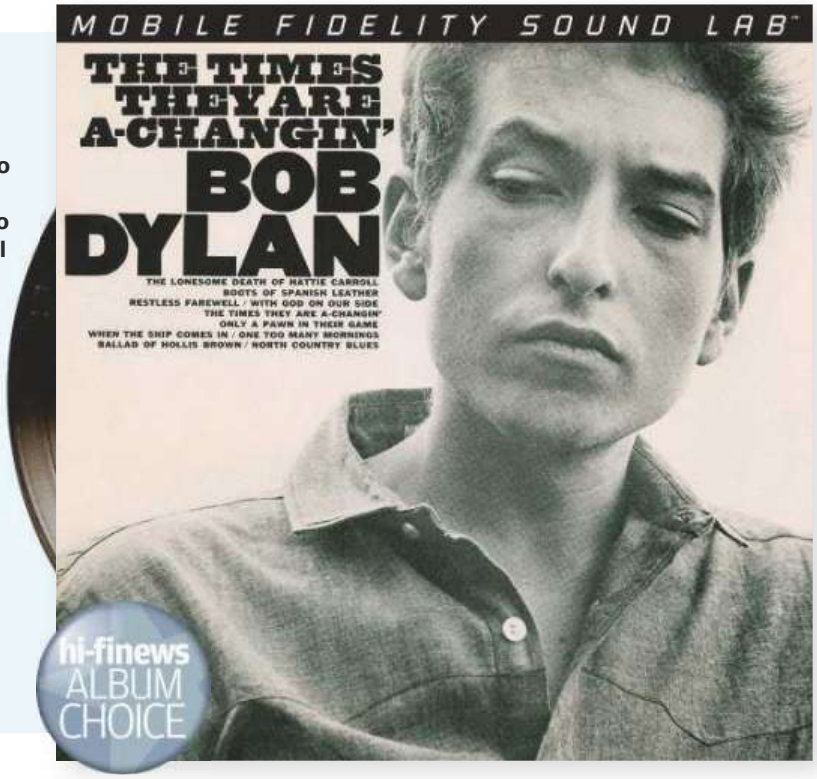
BOB DYLAN
The Times They Are A-Changin'

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 2-421 (two 45rpm LPs)

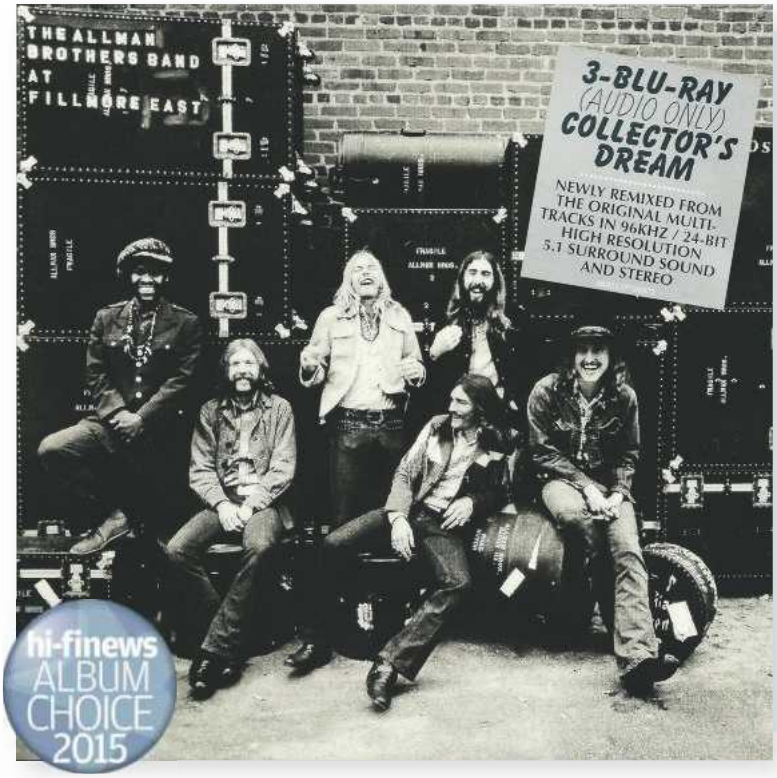
Released in January 1964, Dylan's third studio release was pivotal because it was his first to feature only his own compositions. It was also a monumental statement of protest, made all the more remarkable when one appreciates that the singer was still only 22! (In fact, he would turn 23 the following May.) It is a lean, stark release, but no less rich with imagery; its dark stance presages the final releases from his friend, Johnny Cash. And look at the material: 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', 'With God On Our Side', 'One Too Many Mornings', 'North Country Blues' and six more of that quality and brilliance. Mobile Fidelity has – again – performed a fantastic service for fans of the Zim. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

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AUDIOPHILE: DIGITAL



THE ALLMAN BROTHERS

The 1971 Fillmore East Recordings

BD

Mercury 00602537736973 (three Blu-ray Audio discs)

It was inevitable that *Live At Fillmore East* – one of the greatest live sets of all time – would get the high-res treatment. Unlike the 2003 CD with six bonus tracks, this gives you all four of the original gigs from March 1971 in their entirety, plus the end-of-tour show in June. With this to hand, it's apparent the best tracks made the original release, but this isn't filler: the Allmans were one of the finest blues-based rock bands of all time. On both musical and academic grounds, this 'ultimate' 96kHz/24-bit set with both stereo and 5.1 channel remixes (DTS and Dolby TrueHD) on Blu-ray audio, from the original tapes, is one of the most remarkable examples of rock archaeology ever. It's also offered as a 6CD set. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

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SA

THE BAND

The Last Waltz

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2-2139 (two SACDs)

In the annals of 'greatest-ever rock concerts', the Band's farewell, held at Winterland in San Francisco on Thanksgiving Day, 1976, ranks among the highest. Because this group was so influential – and few would downplay their contribution to roots music, alt.country and other genres celebrating Americana/Canadiana – the guests they attracted were all A-listers: Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Emmylou Harris, The Staples, Van Morrison, Muddy Waters, Eric Clapton, Paul Butterfield and others of that calibre. Alternating the guests' music with Band classics, the set is a representation of the state of music of the day and testament to a musical legend. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



CD

THE BEATLES

Japan Box

Apple/Universal UICY-76429/33 (five discs)

With the UK and US Beatles catalogues reissued as CD and LP box sets, as well as in mono and stereo, it's time for another important territory's versions to receive lavish treatment. Although Germany, Canada and other countries issued local editions, Japanese releases were legendary: lyric sheets, different tracks and artwork, stunning sound. While they resisted making these CDs red like the LPs, the five discs are gorgeous facsimiles of *Meet The Beatles, Second Album, A Hard Day's Night, No. 5* and *Help!* – skipping the albums with identical track listings to the US or the UK. Attention to detail is such that even the 'obi' strips are packed separately: cool. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



CD

CAPTAIN BEEFHEART

Sun Zoom Spark 1970 to 1972

Rhino R2 541728 (four discs)

No-one can argue that Don Van Vliet, aka Captain Beefheart, is best-remembered for the absurdly over-rated *Trout Mask Replica*, but his catalogue included other treasures for the experimentally-minded. The trio in this box – *Lick My Decals Off, Baby; The Spotlight Kid* and *Clear Spot* – followed *Trout Mask Replica* and proved more digestible, though barely more commercial. For those unfamiliar with his oeuvre, he blended rock, blues, psychedelia and avant-garde jazz, performed with his Magic Band, his growly voice in between Dr John and Klaus Nomi. For those enamoured of him, the box is stunning and the bonus CD full of surprises. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



THE KINKS

The Anthology 1964-1971

Sanctuary/Legacy/BMG 88875021542 (five CDS + one 7in single)

No Kinks fan will deny that the band has been 'box-setted' and anthologised far too often, their back catalogue exploited beyond reason. Yet here we are marking their 50th Anniversary with another… but it's phenomenal. Despite most of their albums being reissued with wonderful extras, the compilers found more in the vaults. This set contains all the hits, the key non-hits, live tracks and interviews; of these a stonking 25 tracks are previously unreleased, with two live cuts included on a 7in single. The sound is stupendous, the new-found material of a superior, non-filler nature and the accompanying booklet a visual delight. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



THE PRETENDERS

Pretenders

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD2144 (stereo SACD)

A natural companion to MoFi's SACD of their third album, *Learning To Crawl* [*HFN* Jan '15], this was the storming 1979 debut that put The Pretenders on the musical map. Even I, who loathe the strident and self-righteous Chrissie Hynde as much as I do Bono will unashamedly bow to its greatness. Hynde aside, this was stunning post-punk hard rock, a return to real musicianship in place of mere bombast and phlegm. As it contains the undeniably cool 'Brass In Pocket' and a fine, Nick Lowe-produced cover of 'Stop Your Sobbing' (written by Hynde's ex-hubby, Ray Davies), it would be churlish to award it less than what you see below. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



BIG STAR

Keep An Eye On The Sky

Rhino 81227 95620 (four discs)

This is 2009's magnificent set repackaged in a CD-sized box, at a third of the price. It is a stunning testament to one of the great 'lost' bands, a darling of the critics whose genius was never rewarded with massive popularity or chart hits. Big Star remain an icon for indie bands, power pop practitioners and others who appreciate catchy melodies with lyrics and attitude more in keeping with intellectual drudges like the offensively overrated Velvet Underground. Ninety-eight sublime tracks, many unissued and beautifully annotated, and you just won't believe the sound quality of the demo, 'Motel Blues'. Tragically, only one founding member survives. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%

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THE MONKEES

The Monkees

Rhino R2-543027 (part mono; three discs)

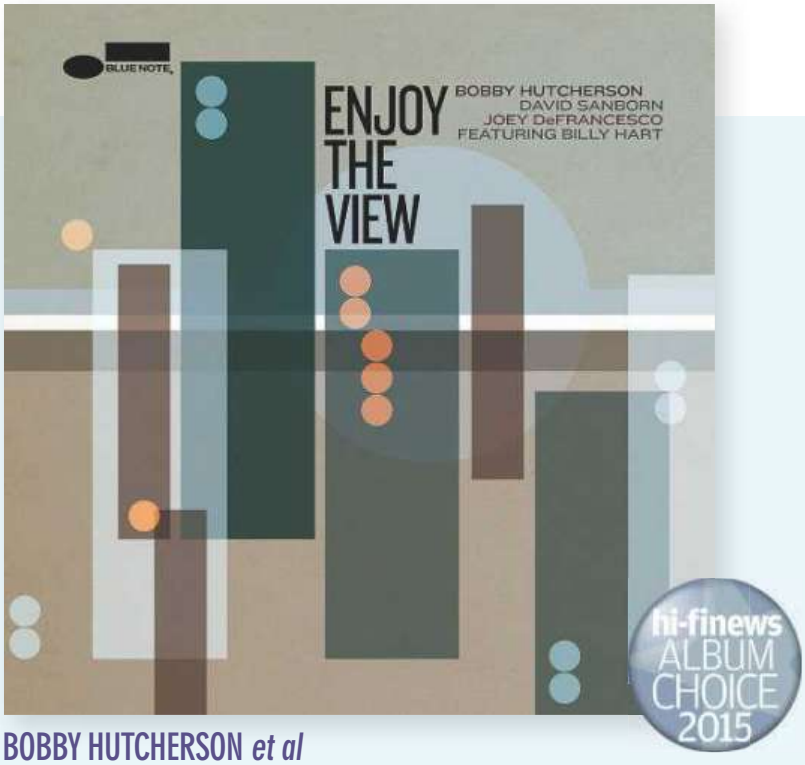
Rhino's 'Super Deluxe' reissues suggest that The Monkees created more unreleased material in five years than many bands yield in 50. Their debut finally receives the treatment, a 7in singles size box holding a CD of the original album in mono and stereo, plus mono TV mixes and promos, a second CD of session tracks, and a third with the *David Jones* solo in both mono and stereo, as well as singles, demos and ultra-rare tracks from Mike Nesmith as 'Michael Blessing'. If you don't 'get' The Monkees and think of them as prefabricated crap, instead of sublime pop, note that John Lennon never missed an episode. Songs from the best writers of the era, performed with the best studio musicians? An utter delight. *KK*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



HI-RES DOWNLOADS



BOBBY HUTCHERSON *et al*

Enjoy The View (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.highresaudio.com; Blue Note 001977902

The veteran vibes player Bobby Hutcherson marks his return to the venerable Blue Note label with this all-star set, produced by label president Don Was and with an all-star line-up including saxophonist David Sanborn, organist Joey DeFrancesco, and drummer Billy Hart. None of these stalwart performers are exactly strangers to the recording studio thanks to extensive careers.

As you might expect, this is a joyful set, with DeFrancesco's Hammond bouncing off Hutcherson's understated vibes, and assured rhythm-keeping by Hart. It's a relaxed, good-time set of tunes, played by a bunch of old masters completely at ease with themselves. If you're after ragged-edge improvisation, it may be better to look elsewhere, but if you're into great musicians doing what they do best, and given the space in the sound-picture to shine, then you need look no further. ***AE***

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



ANOUAR BRAHEM

Souvenance (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.highresaudio.com; ECM 2423/24; 379 7776

Recorded by the Swiss Italian-language broadcaster RSI, this album by oudist Anouar Brahem apparently draws its inspiration from the recent political and social traumas of his native Tunisia. It sees Brahem's lute-like instrument front and centre in the mix. He's helped by close miking, and partnered by Francois Couturier (piano), Klaus Gesing (bass clarinet) and Bjorn Meyer (bass) – oh, and the small matter of the Orchestra Della Svizzera Italiana. Here the orchestra performs the function of the backing drone so often heard in Middle Eastern and North African music, underpinning Brahem's lyrical, reflective playing and the rich interjections of Gesing's clarinet. It's an unusual effect: what is basically a background sound takes on a whole new texture here, and the set as whole is soulful and just a little hypnotic, making it one well worth exploring. *AE*

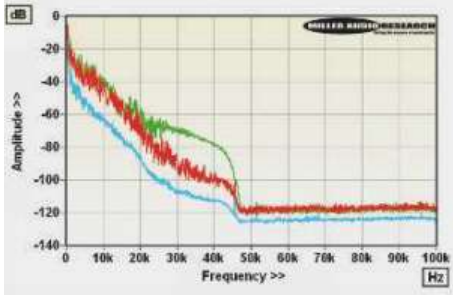
Sound Quality: 95%

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OUR PROMISE

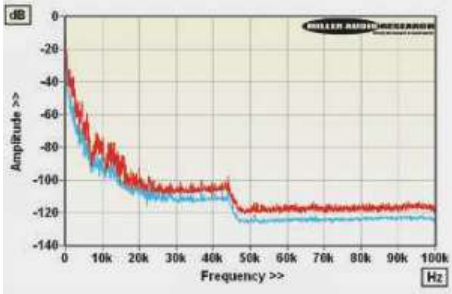
Following our Investigation feature [*HFN*, Jun '11] where we examined the claimed quality of high-resolution downloads, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* is now measuring the true sample rate and bit-depth of the HD music downloads reviewed on these pages. These unique reviews will be a regular source of information for those seeking new and re-mastered recordings offered at high sample rates and with the promise of delivering the very best sound quality. (Note: asterisk in headings denotes technical reservation explained below.) **PM**

LAB REPORT



A genuine 96kHz recording but not without some 'hot' ultrasonic content [green trace, Graph above] that's as likely to be distortion from the percussion mic feed as true >20kHz harmonics. Some tracks also have a parasitic at ~38kHz. PM

LAB REPORT



While tracks 7-11 show some spurious tones (mainly ultrasonic and at <–100dB) this recording is a genuine 96kHz offering, mercifully free of compression. Intriguingly, the close-miked oud puts out most of the energy ~10kHz. PM



CHOPIN

24 Préludes; 3 Ecossaises, *etc*; Ingrid Fliter (192kHz/24-bit; ALAC/FLAC)

www.linnrecords.com; Linn Records CKD475

Chopin collectors will (should) have the Preludes with Friedrich Gulda [Audite/DG, 1950s] or his one-time pupil Martha Argerich [DG, 1975]. Add fellow-Argentinian Ingrid Fliter to the list! Unsurprisingly, her Chopin readings have become more interesting since her 2008/09 EMI debut CDs with the Waltzes, *etc*. Boldly individual she's particularly thoughtful in the quiet tracks, while in, say, the thunderous F-minor (No.18) you never feel that her powerful sound will run out of reserves. The pacing of No 2 might put you in mind of Mussorgsky's 'Polish oxcart' from *Pictures At An Exhibition* while the evergreen 'Raindrop' (No 15) makes me long to hear Ingrid Flier in Ravel's *Gaspard De La Nuit*. Linn's sound is truly realistic (Potton Hall), close and rock-solid. This release also has five Mazurkas and two popular Nocturnes – a 76m programme. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



LISZT

Piano Concertos Nos 1 & 2; Malédiction; Alexandre Kantorow, Tapiola Sinfonietta/Jean-Jacques Kantorow (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.eclassical.com; BIS BIS-2100

As a violinist on the Denon label, Jean-Jacques Kantorow's CDs were invariably well received in *HFN/RR*. Then he took up conducting and has amassed a considerable discography with his Finnish orchestra. This is the remarkable concerto debut recording with his son Alexandre. He's an astonishing pianist, only 17 when these sessions were completed in November 2014 (YouTube has a related film). It's not just his utterly fluent and accurate fingerwork that impresses, but his quicksilver responses to Liszt's abrupt changes from sentiment to red-blooded swagger. And the Steinway D is equally imposing in this explicitly balanced production by Jens Braun. If the Richter/Philips set the benchmark, this BIS alternative is no less engaging. *Malédiction* (piano/strings) makes a fine bonus. *CB*

Sound Quality: 95%

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MARIALY PACHECO

Introducing (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

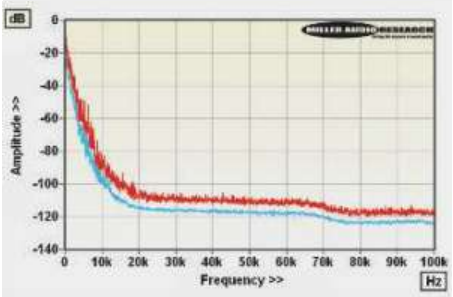
www.highresaudio.com; Neuklang NCD4091

We've only just been introduced, and already 32-year-old Cuban-born Ms Pacheco is sitting at her piano in just her drawers – what is one to think? Actually, Marialy Pacheco already has six previous releases under her belt (not that she's wearing one), and is an acclaimed classical and jazz pianist. This is simply her first album for the Neuklang label, and finds Pacheco going back to her Havana roots, accompanied by Colombian bassist and drummer Juan Camillo Villa and Miguel Altamar. It's a tight little trio, able to kick back on tracks such as 'Cambodian Smiles' or motor through 'En El Camino', while the album centres around the pianist's three-part 'Cuban Suite', exploring the country's dance styles. And the 'klang' here is certainly impressive: yes, the piano is rather spotlit, but the bass and drums are resolved well, and this is a very attractive-sounding set. *AE*

Sound Quality: 95%

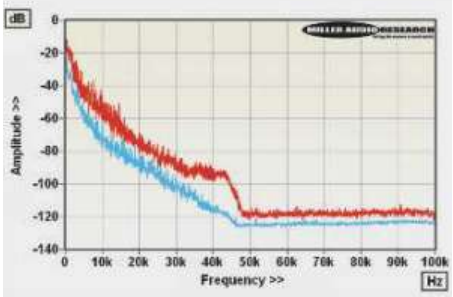
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LAB REPORT



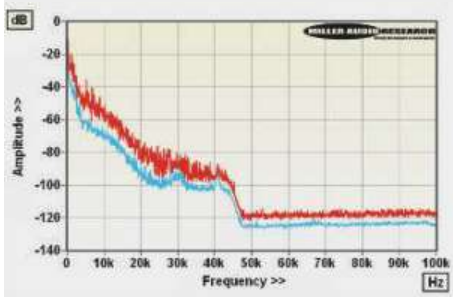
Sampling at 192kHz may seem excessive to record a piano with a harmonic bandwidth that rarely exceeds 20kHz, but the noise floor is exceptionally clean and the 'window' so wide it captures every ambient nuance. PM

LAB REPORT



Offered here in its original 96kHz/24-bit recorded format, this BIS download shows full use of the available ~45kHz bandwidth and with good dynamic range too. There's only a hint of clipping with the loudest brass. PM

LAB REPORT



The bandwidth of the piano is necessarily limited to ~12kHz but percussion makes better use of this 96kHz file's 40kHz+ span. The artefacts at ~30kHz/41kHz [see Graph] are from the piano feed and absent from the vocal intro on trk 7. PM

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HI-RES DOWNLOADS



VOCES8

Lux (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.highresaudio.com; Decca Classics 478 8053

With Oliafur Eliasson's 2003 installation from Tate Modern as cover (and texts white on orange – hard to read!) this vocal collection of arrangements covers a wide time-span, like their Signum album *Choral Tapestry*. Their second Decca programme, on the theme of a comforting warmth that music can bring, introduces one or two instrumental 'guests' – cello, saxophone, water-tuned glasses – and spans from Tallis and Allegri (*Miserere Mei*) to contemporary writers in the pop field: 'Teardrop' from Massive Attack's *Mezzanine* and Ben Folds' 'The Luckiest' from a Richard Curtis film soundtrack – an item I found intrusive. Voces8 (two sopranos, counter-tenors and tenors, baritone and bass) were recorded in helpful acoustics at Dore Abbey, in Herefordshire, and more intimately, a Highgate, London, church. Hard to fault, though arguably best for 'dipping into'. *CB*

Sound Quality: 95%

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MARK KNOPFLER

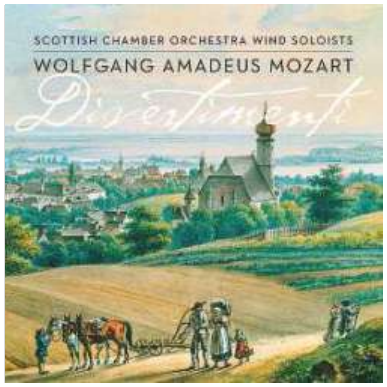
Tracker (Deluxe) (96-192kHz/24-bit; FLAC/ALAC)

www.highresaudio.com; Virgin/EMI/Mercury 4716979

Knopfler's eighth solo album mixes rock, Celtic and country influences, and more than a measure of introspection, providing a 'spot the reference' game for the casual observer and fans alike. There's more than a hint of *Local Hero* here and there – well, quite a lot actually – and his homage to Beryl Bainbridge is pure 'Sultans Of Swing', unlikely though that sounds. Inspired by his time touring with Bob Dylan – notably in 'Silver Eagle' – this is Knopfler as storyteller, from Bainbridge to poet Basil Bunting, whom he met when he was a copy boy on the Newcastle *Evening Chronicle*. Trouble is, Knopfler's writing, scoring, and performance are so distinctive that it can sound like there's not much new here, even though the sound quality of the stripped-down recording is gorgeous. Even that's really 'business as usual', but no complaints from this listener. *AE*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



MOZART

Serenade in E flat, K375; Divertimenti K253, 270, 252/240a and 240; SCO Wind Soloists (192kHz/24-bit; ALAC/FLAC)

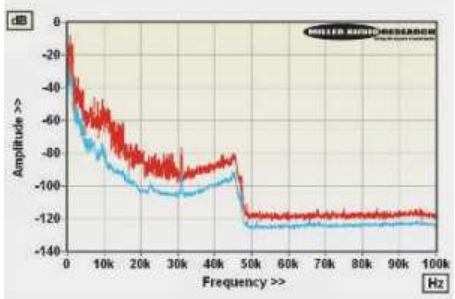
www.linnrecords.com; CKD 479

Most collectors will have discovered the Mozart *Divertimenti* and Serenades via Decca and its mono/stereo LP series with various Viennese ensembles, from the time of Willi Boskovsky. Linn's enjoyable programme with the SCO players – pairs of clarinets, horns and bassoons – has more of an 'outdoors' style, fresh and open. The works chosen are varied in form: K375 has two *Menuetto e Trio* movements; the F major K253 has an opening set of variations; K252/240a includes a *Polonaise*. One oddity with Philips Hobbs' production, I found, is that you hear the bassoons (and a certain amount of associated key clicking) on the left, answered by clarinets on the right. But it's easy to reverse channels if you think 'treble' ought – as with an orchestra – to be on the left. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

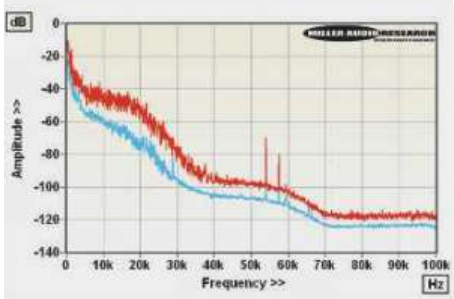
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LAB REPORT



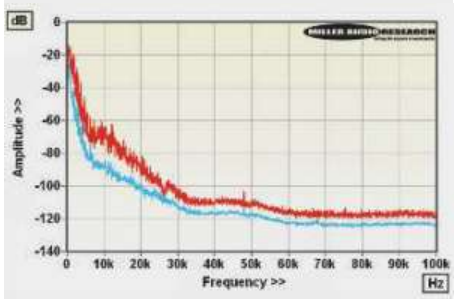
Cleanly recorded (aside from a signal at 31kHz) and with excellent dynamic range (the rise in ultrasonic noise is from the original – not an artefact of upsampling), this 96kHz file perfectly illustrates the 30kHz extension of a soprano voice. PM

LAB REPORT



Recorded using 'tubes and tape' (incl. a Neumann U47 mic, Telefunken V76 preamp and Studer A800 2in decks) the mix was stored at 96kHz/24-bit, so this 192kHz rendering is an upsample. This is a superb example of the art. PM

LAB REPORT



Recorded by Philip Hobbs at the Stevenson Hall, this is a clean 192kHz rendering with an excess of bandwidth to capture the ~30kHz extension of the clarinet's upper harmonics. Dynamic range/headroom is also generous. PM



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Focal JM Lab Grande Utopia III EM	£121,999
Focal JM Lab Scala Utopia 3	£18,999
Focal JM Lab Stella Utopia III EM	£47,990
Focal JM Lab Maestro Utopia 3	£16,990
Gamut S5	£9,490
Genesis Technologies 5.3	£7,500
Guru QM60	£2,750
Hansen Audio The Knight	£9,900
Hansen Audio Emperor	£32,500
Hansen Audio Prince V2	£18,000
Heco celan 500	£550
Infinity Kappa 9	£1,750
JBL 250 Ti	£2,890
KEF Moun	£85,000
Krell resolution 3	£2,700
Loewe Reference stand speaker	£1,400
Martin Logan Summit	£5,500
Martin Logan Logos Centre	£890
Meridian Audio DSP 5200	£7,500
Meridian Audio DSP 7200	£16,500
Merlin VSM MXR	£6,495
Revel Ultima Studio 2 NEW	£8,490
Ruark Rapsody	£200
Sonus Faber Amati Homage	£7,990
Sonus Faber Minuetto & Ironwood stands	£890
Sonus Faber Amati Anniversario GR	£11,990
Sonus Faber Cremona	£2,000
Sonus Faber Guarneri Homage Palladio Reference LE	£6,750
Spendor A3	£600
Spendor s100	£1,500
Titan 3Way	£1,295
Totem Hawk	£1,400
Wharfedale 1950's Corner Horns	£6,990
Wilson Audio Watt Puppy 7	£6,490
Wilson Audio WATT Puppy 7	£7,490
Wilson Audio Watt Puppy 7	£6,750
Wilson Audio WP8	£10,995

Power Amplifiers

Aesthetix Atlas Mono Blocks	£9,990
Astin Trew At 5000	£400
ATC S1A2-150	£2,200
Audio Note Kegon	£35,000
Audio Research DS450 (New-sealed box)	£4,995
AVI 2000 MM	£600
B.A.T. VK-255 SE	£3,700
Bel Canto Ref 1000 M (Mk2) Mono blocks NEW	£4,300
Bel Canto Ref 1000 monos	£1,990
BMC Audio CS2 Integrated/ Power Amplifier	£5,495
BMC Audio M2 Monoblocks	£10,990
Boulder 2060	£14,990
Chord Electronics Symphonic MC phono stage	£1,875
Conrad Johnson Prem 8A monoblocks	£4,950
Crimson Electronics 640 E3 Monoblocks	£3,399
Edge NL Reference Monoblocks	£34,990
Electrocompaniet NEMO AW-600	£4,900
Goldmund Telos 150	£1,690
Gryphon Antileon	£5,990
Halcro DM 88 Monoblocks	£24,950
Jeff Rowland Model 3 Monoblocks	£2,500
Karan Acoustics S180 Stereo power	£1,890
Karan Acoustics KA M2000	£22,990
Krell 400e Evolution Monoblocks	£9,990
Krell FPB 400CX	£4,490
Krell EVO 302	£5,500
Lamm Lamm M1.1	£6,990
Leema Acoustics Corvus	£999
Linn klimax Solos	£8,995
Luxman M800A stereo power	£8,990
Mark Levinson No 532H Reference High current Dual Mono Power Amp	£7,500
Mark Levinson No 532H stereo power amp	£4,995
Mark Levinson No. 532	£9,990
McIntosh MC203	£3,950
McIntosh MC275 (2 Available)	£4,250
Musical Fidelity 308 K Mono-blocks	£650
Naim Audio Nap 180	£600
Naim Audio Nait 3	£320
Pathos InPower	£4,990
Plinius SA 250mkIV	£3,495
Sony TAN R1 monoblocks	£8,990
Soulution Audio 711 upgraded from 710	£29,990
Tenor HP 300	£15,500
Tom Evans Linear A	£4,750
Tube Technology Genesis Monoblocks	£1,390
VTL MB 450-III Signature Monoblocks	£14,500
Welborne Labs DRD45	£1,490
YBA Passion 1000 monoblocks	£6,890

Pre Amplifiers

Audible Illusions Modulus 3A	£2,250
Audio Research LS2	£950
Audio Research LS25 (mkI)	£1,800
AVI 2000MP	£400
B.A.T. VK-53 SE	£8,240
BMC Audio DAC1PreHR	£3,990
Boulder 1010 Pre	£6,950
Bryston BP-26 and MPS-2	£2,200
C.A.T SL1 Ultimate	£7,295
Cary SLP 98L	£2,295
Classe Audio CP - 800	£4,000
Concordant Exquisite + Exclusive	£1,150
Crimson Electronics 710 Pre Amp	£3,995
Gryphon Sonata Allegro	£5,490
Jadis JPL	£1,700
Klyne Audio Arts 7LX3.5 & phono	£2,790
Krell Evolution 202	£4,990
Linn Klimax Kontrol	£4,250
Luxman C800f	£8,990
Mark Levinson 380s	£1,999
Mark Levinson No 326s Reference Dual Mono Pre	£8,170
Mark Levinson No 380	£1,790
McIntosh C2200	£3,750
McIntosh C2500	£4,500
Musical Fidelity Kw Phono	£1,450
Sony TAE 900	£2,990
Tom Evans The Vibe pre & Pulse power supply	£2,750
Unison Research C5P	£995
VTL TL 6.5 Signature Line Pre	£9,990

Turntables/Arms/Cartridges & Phonostages

Aesthetix IO Eclipse	£15,590
Audio Research PH8 black	£3,890
BMC Audio MCCI Phono MC	£2,590
Boulder MM/MC Phono stage & psu	£1,795
Cello Cartridge	£4,000
Clear Audio da Vinci V2	£2,890
Clear Audio Insider Gold	£500
DaVinciAudio Labs Reference Gandezza Cartridge	£2,790
Dr. Feickert Analogue NG High-Precision Cartridge Alignment Tool	£149
EMT 950 Broadcast Turnta Fabulous BBC Wide body	£6,500
Gale GT2101 Turntable	£7,990
Jan Allaerts MC1B mk1	£1,495
Klyne Audio Arts 6PE mm/mc	£1,950
Kuzma Stabi (wood) & Ref psu	£1,990
LFD MCT SE Phono mc	£3,500
Linn LP12	£1,500
Linn Sondek LP12, Ittok, Majik PSU, Rosewood	£3,500
Manticore Mantra	£300
Naim Audio Prefix Phono	£175
Nottingham Analogue Wave Mechanic	£250
Origin Live Digital Stylus Force Gauge	£65
Pink Triangle Export/ Zeta	£1,495
SME 312s	£2,050
SME Model 10A turntable	£4,490
SME Model 30/2A	£8,790
SME Series V Gold plated arm	£2,395
SME Model 20/12A	£11,567
SME Model 20/3A	£8,990
SME Model 30/12A	£23,950
SME Series V (gold print)	£2,490
SME Series V-12	£3,668
Sonic frontiers SFP-1 Phono	£750
Sumiko Pearwod Celebration II	£1,150
Thorens TD 126 mkIV	£590
Tom Evans The Groove Plus mkII	£4,990
Tri-Planar MK UII Voyd Reference+ Ref psu + Cyalene+ AN IO LTD & AN7c	£20,990
VPI TNT 4 Flywheel RB1000	£4,500
VPI Classic 2/JMW 10.5i & SDS psu	£2,490
Wheaton Tri-Planar MK IV	£1,795

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PUNCH BROTHERS

The Phosphorescent Blues (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.highresaudio.com; Warner Music/Nonesuch

There's nothing like being ambitious: according to Punch Brothers lead singer and mandolin player Chris Thile, this album grew out of the question 'how do we cultivate beautiful, three-dimensional experiences with our fellow man in this day and age?'. So we have songs about recognising a song – the epic 'Familiarity', all ten minutes plus of it – and about shining your light by holding a smartphone in the air at a gig, complete with a backing chorus comprising vocals submitted by fans, these two topping and tailing the set. All sound a bit icky and navel-gazing? Far from it: with the assured production of T Bone Burnett, some serious dynamics and close focus on the performers, this set is at turns attention-grabbing, unpredictable, quirky and sincere. It swings from folk to classical to even a little rocky, but all in a good way, and is hard not to like. *AE*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



PROKOFIEV

Symphony No 5; Scythian Suite
Bergen PO/Andrew Litton (96kHz/24-bit; FLAC)

www.eclassical.com; BIS-2124

The Fifth Symphony has fared well on records, right back to the 1946 Koussevitsky/RCA and particularly with American orchestras. Prokofiev's 1915 Diaghilev ballet commission for *Ala Et Lolli*, a mythological Scythian concoction, met with rejection: the composer 'did not understand a thing about dance', said Balanchine. So the score yielded the dissonant four-movement Suite here. Long regarded as a riposte to Stravinsky's *La Sacre* it even sounds quite jolly in Litton's hands in parts, rather like a piece of film music, although the first track is suitably wild. The symphony is weighty, entirely naturally paced and full of colourful detail. The 'slow motion' and acceleration back to tempo in the *Allegro Marcato* is really impressive, and the production has a wide soundstage with clear, inner balances. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



NEIL COWLEY TRIO

Touch And Flee (96kHz/24-bit; WAV, ALAC, FLAC)

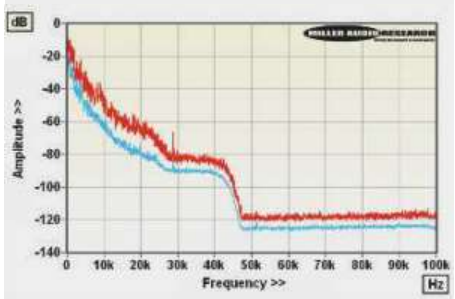
www.naimlabel.com; Naim Jazz Records Naim CD206

Former Brand New Heavies keyboardist Neil Cowley – a child prodigy playing Shostakovich piano concertos at the age of ten – can arguably lay claim to being one of the world's most heard pianists in current times, having accompanied Adele on both her *19* and *21* albums. This fifth release from the trio with drummer Evan Jenkins and bassist Rex Horan (replacing Richard Sadler after 2010's Naim album *Radio Silence*) sees Cowley once again crossing myriad musical boundaries. His compositions encompass everything from playful jazz-funk and dance rhythms to anthem-like pop and prog-rock chord progressions – making the description of Cowley's trio as 'jazz for Radiohead fans' highly appropriate. Recorded in London's RAK studios, *Touch And Flee* is a fabulous recording with a naturally open and authentic sound and lifelike dynamics. *JB*

Sound Quality: 85%

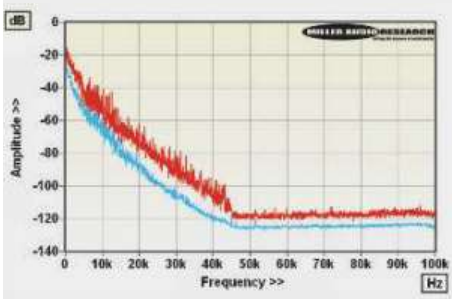
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LAB REPORT



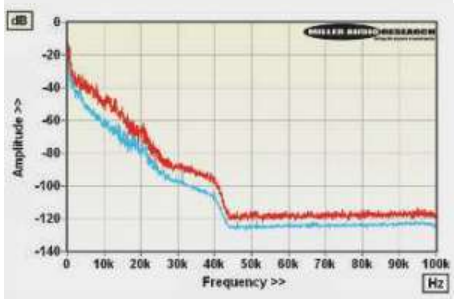
There's clearly some heavyweight production talent thrown at this album but levels of noise suggest either analogue recording or mastering at some point in the '96kHz chain'. Very little instrumental content beyond 30kHz. PM

LAB REPORT



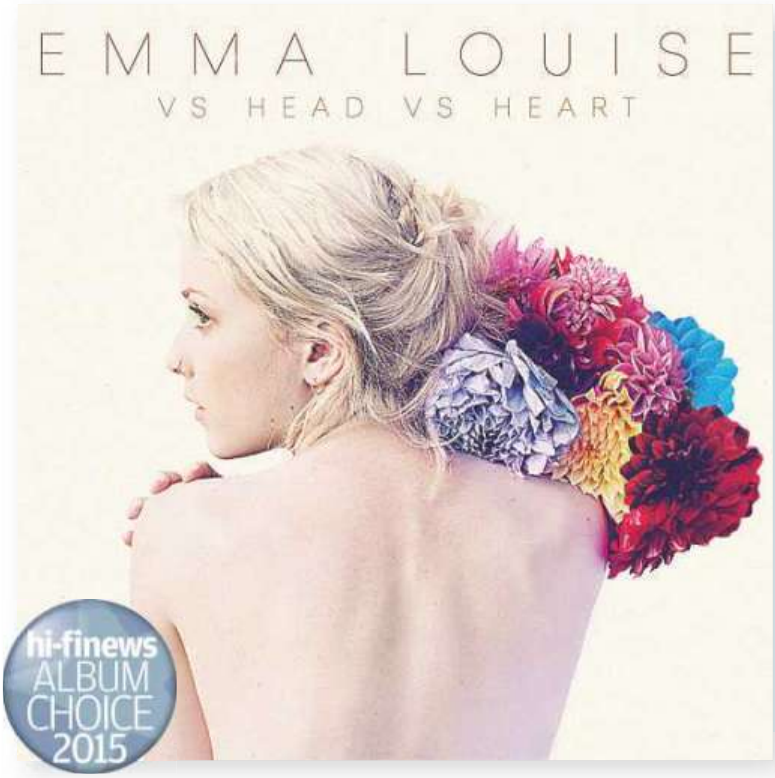
Recorded at 96kHz/24-bit in 2014 this file's metadata may erroneously state '1970' but at least the media itself is the 'real deal' and not a downsample from BIS's SACD. Good dynamic range and full use of the ~45kHz bandwidth. PM

LAB REPORT



This 96kHz download sees the trio performing as just that [*The Face Of Mount Molehill – HFN* Oct '12 – included strings and guitar] but the clean rendering, free of digital artifice and compression, is equally refreshing. PM

ROCK



EMMA LOUISE
Vs Head Vs Heart

Emma Louise Records HENCASDGA1

You may know singer-songwriter Emma Louise best from the Wankelnut remix 'My Head Is A Jungle' which recently did well in the charts, or from her original version of the same track, entitled 'Jungle', which appeared in a recent Black Opium perfume ad on the telly. Either way, you should have noticed that this 23-year-old Australian who learned her craft busking in the streets of Brisbane, and honed it making tunes on her bedroom computer, is remarkably talented. Check her use of found vocal samples on 'Atlas Eyes', or her minimalist synth-lines on '17 Hours', and it's impossible not to conclude that anyone who ever loved St Etienne or Everything But The Girl or Lights will soon fall under her spell. Don't wait: get it now! *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



ASTRID WILLIAMSON
We Go To Dream

One Little Indian TPLP1251CD

After six exquisite solo albums, Williamson still isn't a household name. The problem? Musically she's hard to pigeon-hole and lyrically she's inclined to examine topics like feminism, war and spirituality in more depth and with more individuality than our mass media can happily snuggle up to. Musically, for example, she'll subvert a beautifully aching, sensitively sung pop tune like 'Hide In Your Heart' with big, anxious synth stabs – a justified creative decision, but not a hotline to hitsville. Her skeletal heartache ballad 'Scattered', just Astrid and her piano, could sell millions if promoted via any of the TV 'reality' shows, but it's probably too real for them. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



RACHAEL DADD
We Resonate

Talitres TAL080

Experimental multi-instrumentalist Dadd is one of the quirkiest of singer-songwriters but she's also one of the best. I first heard her as part of Whalebone Polly, singing the weird little ditty 'Our Socks Forevermore'. It was obvious that a refreshing new talent had arrived, and this album is a complete joy. Songs like 'Three' and 'Bounce The Ball' are as appealing as they are odd, and her use of exotic rhythmic devices including prepared-piano, a typewriter, boxes of matches and even her baby's heartbeat in the womb, makes it a richly eclectic sonic treat. Dadd may never become a 'star', but I bet she'll still be making captivating music 20 years hence. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



SAMANTHA CRAIN
Under Branch And Thorn And Tree

Full Time Hobby FTH236CD (vinyl FTH236LP)

If you prefer your folk singers a shade more traditional than the high-profile acoustic popsters currently trading as folk-rockers, Samantha Crain could be the woman for you. This is the Shawnee-descended singer-songwriter's fourth album, and it's a comfortingly solid set of underdog tales, vignettes about life as a working person in America today. 'Elk City', focusing on the sorrows of a young woman who turned to drink to survive hard times, shines with the heartfelt lyrical clarity of Woody Guthrie at his best, and the jaunty 'Big Rock' delivers light relief with a country-rock groove. Crain feels like she's in it for the long haul and the odds are good that she'll make it. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

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CHRIS WHILE AND JULIE MATTHEWS
Who We Are

Fat Cat Records FATCD029

If you've never heard of this country-folk singer-songwriter duo, it's not for want of trying on their part: they've worked together on and off for 20 years. For several years, they were mainstays of the venerable Albion Band, but as a duo they exhibit a less traditional folk style. After all those years, they should be burnt out, but opener 'If This Were Your Last Day' and the banjo-driven 'I Don't Know' are fresh as daisies and on a par with the work of more high-profile American combos like Lady Antebellum or The Band Perry. They're lyrically astute, rhythmically powerful and melodically delightful; let's hope their next two decades bring them even greater rewards. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



GERARD WAY
Hesitant Alien

Reprise Records 9362-49372-1

When a superb band and its frontman go their separate ways it is often the beginning of the end for both. My Chemical Romance no longer exists as such, and the other members have yet to produce much, but frontman Gerard Way has returned to active service with an enormously powerful album that is in equal parts hard, driving rock and catchy pop suss. He's put a tight band – The Hormones – together, and although the album may lack light and shade as a collection of songs, there's no denying the over-driven energy that animates every track. *Hesitant Alien* batters along relentlessly through its eleven cuts: a terrific start to Way's solo career. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



IN-FLIGHT SAFETY
Conversationalist

Conehead Records CONE49

Canadians, of course, punch a long way above their weight when it comes to making great rock music. Think Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen and, in more recent times, Arcade Fire. Nova Scotia-based duo In-Flight Safety have the songs and musicianly skills to join that elevated pantheon. Guitarist John Mullane and drummer Glen Nicholson, fill out their sound in the studio and on stage with carefully chosen buddies, and this unusual *modus operandi*, works. On their third CD, several songs, *eg*, 'Animals' and 'Tie A String', come complete with chiming guitar ambience, solid beats and soaring vocals that tend towards the anthemic. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

CORNELIA
Balun

Camp Mozart

Big Bang-type techno-geeks out there may already know that a balun is an electrical device which 'converts between a balanced signal and an unbalanced signal'. I had to look it up and I still don't quite understand. What I do understand is that this is a stunningly lovely hi-tech electronic pop album by Swedish singer-songwriter and innovator Cornelia Dahlgren. Not only does Dahlgren possess a gorgeous voice, but she writes songs infused with Bjork-like imagination and records them via her laptop, anywhere from kitchens to church halls. She won't immediately have any international EDM smash hits, but she will stretch your mind. Balun is also available as a 'limited edition audio poster'. This may just be the future. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



ROCK



PINK FLOYD
The Endless River

Parlophone Records 490-1727

I rarely like to review 'major' album releases but a 'new' Pink Floyd release is an event which even I can't ignore. Despite being constructed largely from out-takes recorded for 1994's *The Division Bell*, it quickly became the most pre-ordered album ever on Amazon. Primarily instrumental, it features mostly electronic keyboard textures from late keyboardist Rick Wright, enhanced by overdubs from guitarist Dave Gilmour and drummer Nick Mason. Don't buy it if Pink Floyd, to you, means angry prog-rock magnificence (*The Wall*, *Dark Side*, *etc*) but dive right in if you love the spaced-out ambient instrumental side of the band that started (arguably) with 'Set The Controls For The Heart Of The Sun' back in 1968. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



NRVS LVRS
The Golden West

Hz Castle 888295195782

This excellent San Francisco quartet have pulled off a rare achievement by managing to incorporate deep socio-political lyrics into what sounds, at first listen, like lightweight electro-pop. As you bop around your front room to the jangly pop candy of 'Black Diamonds', you'd never know that you're knee deep in an album about cultural decay, economic problems and the housing market on California's golden coast. This four-piece only came together a year ago, but they already sound like they could attract a major cult following if they can get a video into high rotation, or if they're as compelling live as their studio recordings suggest. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



OF MONTREAL
Aureate Gloom

Polyvinyl Records PRC-290

Of Montreal – one of the few Athens, Georgia, bands to make a lasting impact in the wake of REM – are in superstar form on their 13th album. It blasts into life with the Bolan-channeling stomp of 'Bassem Sabry', named for the brilliant Egyptian journalist who died last year, then going a bit more Bowie on 'Last Rites At The Jane Hotel' before sounding rather more like themselves on the beautifully-constructed 'Empyrean Abattoir'. Yes, despite influences worn high on their sleeves, Kevin Barnes' psychedelic-glam quintet definitely boasts its own sonic identity, snotty and angry, hyper-intellectual and loadsafun. An acquired taste but well worth sampling. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



SOMEONE STILL LOVES YOU BORIS YELTSIN
The High Country

Polyvinyl Record Co PRC-295

Ten years into their prolific career, Missouri's indie rock heroes have thrived despite their unwieldy moniker. Purveying energetic, poppy alt-rock, they improve with every album and, even though it only runs to 26m, *The High Country* is jammed with more memorably tight tunes than most albums of twice its length. The fuzz-rich 'What I Won' is a case in point, its layers of guitar distortion overlaid with a sweet vocal propelled by stone-solid drums and insistently thrumming bass. The punky thrash of 'Trevor Forever' and the chilled angst of 'Madeline' are two of 11 reasons why this is an album you'll keep playing. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



HUSKY RESCUE
The Long Lost Friend Special Edition

Catskills Records RIDCD025

Husky Rescue is a criminally under-exposed Finnish electronic combo whose fourth album, *The Long Lost Friend*, appeared only as a self-released item in 2013. Its eight haunting tracks are expanded to 24 for this special edition, which includes not only rare 7in releases but also an entire new album, *Hypnopompic*, featuring the group's impressive new line-up. As well as shimmeringly gorgeous electro-pop songs with meltingly luscious vocals by Johanna Kalen, we get computer-synth wiz Marko Nyberg's richly atmospheric instrumental compositions in partnership with composer Anthony Bentley. The most sonically sumptuous electronica album of 2015. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



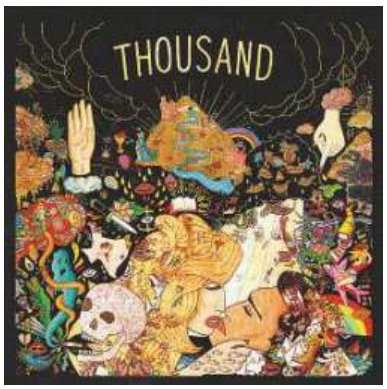
LINNEA OLSSON
Breaking And Shaking

Sony Music 88875012202

A gifted cellist, singer-songwriter and Peter Gabriel collaborator, Norway's Linnea Olsson is fast becoming a force to be reckoned with on the international scene. Her debut album, *Ah!*, was notable for its ambient-experimental instrumentals, but this time she's putting her appealing voice and clever songs front and centre without abandoning her avant-garde leanings. Imagine Laurie Anderson with pop suss, Kate Bush with a voice that doesn't grate after ten minutes, or Enya with less sugar, and you're well on the way to Olsson. Every cut is delightful, but the insightful 'The Love She Kept' and the vocal-sample-driven 'I Am Younger' are outstanding spine-tinglers. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



THOUSAND
Thousand

Talitres Records TAL083CD (LP: TAL083LP)

Opening cut 'The Flying Pyramid' starts out like a folksy-version of Lou Reed and then unexpectedly transforms into African-inflected pop *à la* Vampire Weekend. It's followed by 'The Kill', a potent melange of chilled pop-rock and disco whoops, and the spooky 'To Dance In A Circle Of Fire', making it clear that Stephane Milochevitch, aka Thousand, is an imaginative newcomer on the international landscape. Essentially, he's a folksy singer-songwriter, but his easy familiarity with a range of eclectic instruments and exotic percussion sets him apart from most musicians in that currently over-subscribed category. Ed Sheeran he ain't, but that's no bad thing. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

THE VERONICAS
The Veronicas

Sony Music88875012962

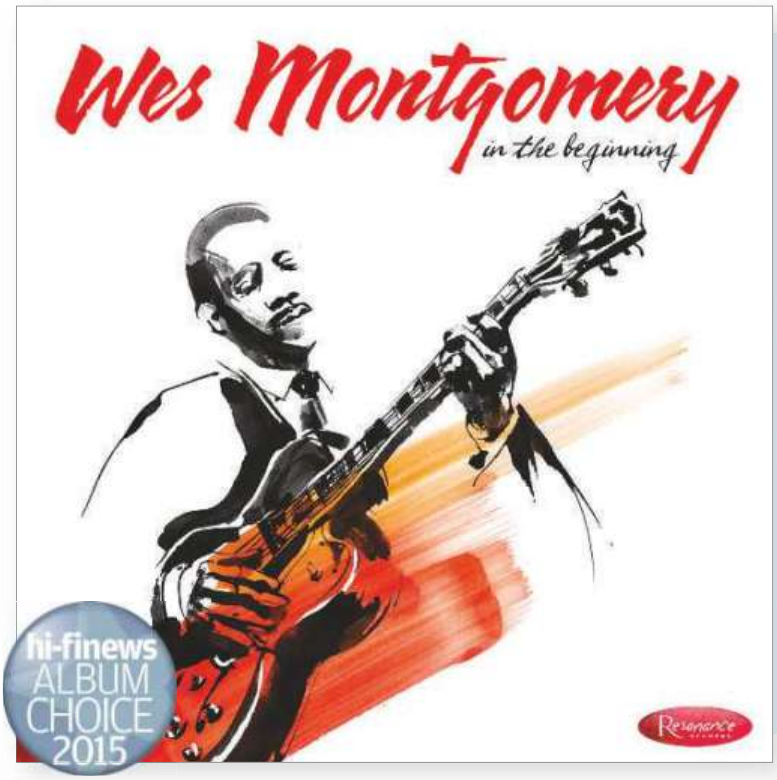
After a relatively quiet few years, identical twin sisters The Veronicas recently returned to No 1 in Australia's singles chart with 'You Ruin Me' and followed up with a Top 5 placing for 'If You Love Someone'. They've never yet made a big impact in the UK, but this third album (which includes both of those tracks) could be the one to break them big here. As songwriters, they're mistresses of killer pop-rock hooks and tasty arrangements; but better yet, they deliver their smart modern woman lyrics with a passionate intensity that burns them into your head at first listen. Almost any track here could be a single, and although they're not great innovators, the instant appeal of what they do should overcome any opposition. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 95%

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JAZZ



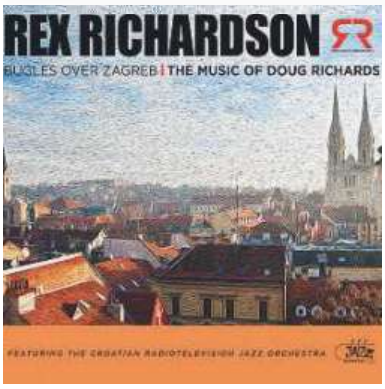
WES MONTGOMERY
In The Beginning

Resonance Records HCD-2014 (two CDs, three LPs; mono)

In 2012 Resonance put out *Echoes Of Indiana Avenue*, containing newly-discovered live recordings of the Montgomery brothers Wes, Buddy and Monk from 1957 and 1958. After that, Buddy's widow came up with another trove of live tapes from 1956, and these fill most of one CD here. On the second disc are the five forgotten studio numbers that Quincy Jones produced at Columbia for the Epic label in 1955. Unless you count Resonance's two USA-only 10in LPs, which sampled these tracks for Record Store Day, 2014, almost all this material is previously unreleased. To close, there are Wes's earliest studio recordings, as a sideman with saxophonist Gene Morris in 1949, dubbed from rare 78s. Essential. *SH*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



REX RICHARDSON
Bugles Over Zagreb

RRP 88829519081

By accident or design, the barnstorming trumpeter had two albums released on the same day. This one, of music by fellow VCU educator Doug Richards, was recorded with the distinctive Croatian RTV Jazz Orchestra in 2013. 'Intercontinental Concerto' builds on themes from six continents and requires Richardson to play five different instruments, from slide trumpet to piccolo trumpet to flugelhorn. Then comes 'Dukal Bugles', paying tribute to five Ellington trumpet stars. With 'It Don't Mean A Thing' as a homage to Cat Anderson, this really ends on a high note. And the other album? *Blue Shift* [Summit Records] has Richardson with his own quintet, and it's great too. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



JAZZ IN POLISH CINEMA
Out Of The Underground 1958-1967

Jazz On Film Records JF002 (four discs)

After the 'thaw' of 1956, young Polish filmmakers dared to use the music of pioneer jazz pianist/composers Krzysztof Komeda and Andrzej Trzaskowski, and the results are captured in this superbly-presented box. For *Night Train* (1959), Trzaskowski adapted Artie Shaw's 'Moonray' as an unforgettable vocal theme for Wanda Warska. With a band including a youthful Tomasz Stanko, Komeda produced some exciting hard-bop-styled tracks for *Innocent Sorcerers* (1960), and the story ends with his music for *Le Départ* (1967), recorded in Paris with musicians including Stanko, Don Cherry, Gato Barbieri, Eddy Louiss and Christine Legrand. Unmissable. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



ELIO VILLAFRANCA AND THE JASS SYNCOPATORS
Caribbean Tinge: Live From Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola

Motema 233864

This great pianist has already made half a dozen albums since arriving in NY in 1995, including *Dos y Mas*, a duo recorded with his fellow Cuban, percussionist Arturo Stable. But the music here (live, 2011/12) has more in common with his *The Source In Between*, whose title tune is heard in extended form as the closing number. And the new album's own title track is like a supercharged Horace Silver blend of hard bop and island influences. There are two different lineups, both superb, with trumpeters Sean Jones and Terell Stafford and saxophonists Vincent Herring and Greg Tardy, and some great Cuban percussion. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



FRED HERSCH TRIO
Floating

Palmetto PM2171

Recording consistently since 1984, Fred Hersch has sometimes seemed likely to take on the mantle of Bill Evans, to whom he paid tribute with *Evanessence*. More recently, he's won acclaim for a string of live recordings, including *Alive At The Vanguard* with John Hebert on bass and Eric McPherson on drums. For *Floating* Hersch took this well-established trio into the studio but as he says, it's 'sequenced the way we play a live set'. After a re-rhythmed 'You And The Night And The Music' come the spacious and transporting title piece, more originals, a delightful 'If Ever I Would Leave You', and finally Monk's 'Let's Cool One'. And it's just a perfect sequence. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



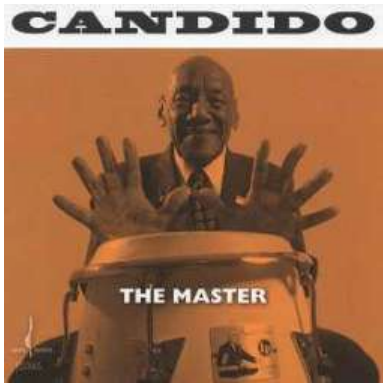
JIMMY GREENE
Beautiful Life

Mack Avenue MAC1093

In December 2012, saxophonist Jimmy Greene's daughter Ana died in the Sandy Hook classroom shooting. Harry Connick Jr sang at Ana's funeral and recorded the fund-raising tribute 'Love Wins.' But *Beautiful Life* owes its existence to a fine gesture by Norman Chesky of Chesky Records. Early in 2013 he offered to donate the production of a recording that Greene could do whenever he was ready, and have complete ownership. Weaving many elements together in a multi-layered celebration of Ana's life, Greene included her voice, a children's choir and a string orchestra as well as guest appearances from Pat Metheny and Kurt Elling. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



CANDIDO
The Master

Chesky Records JD365 (downloads up to 192kHz/24-bit)

A great celebration of an extraordinary career, and a warm-hearted gathering of New York's Latin-jazz royalty. Havana-born *conguero* Candido Camaro arrived in New York from Havana in 1952 and was soon helping pianist Billy Taylor's 'mambo' trio to fame. After that he never looked back, and remains active in his 90s. Here the music and arrangements are by Ray Santos, best known as arranger of *The Mambo Kings* soundtrack and Linda Ronstadt's *Frenesi*. One of the standouts is 'Lagrimas Negras', a fine vocal feature for Xiomara Laugart but also a fabulous performance from the band. Chesky's Binaural+ makes the sonics natural, spacious and relaxed. *SH*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

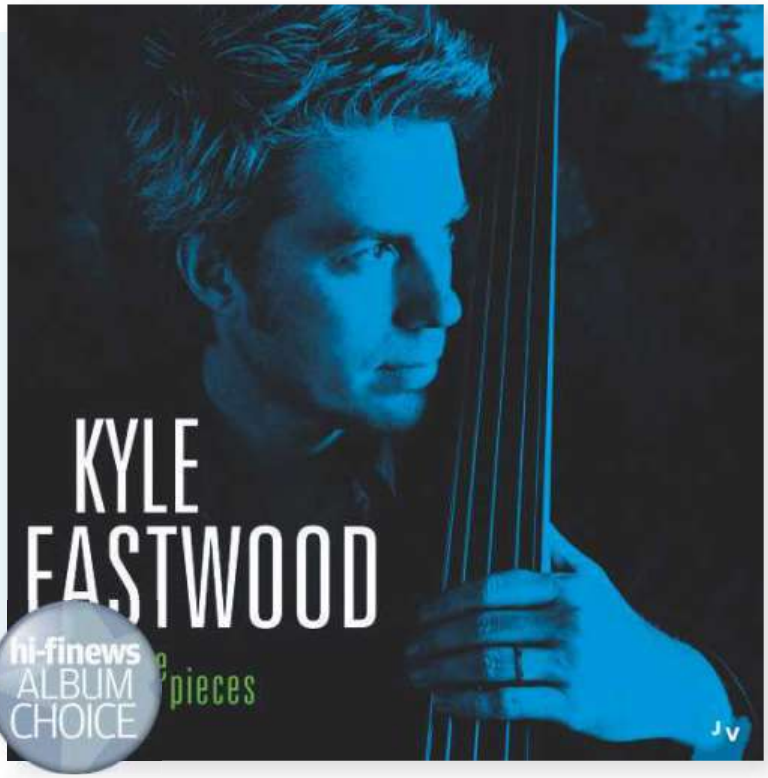
KYLE EASTWOOD
Timepieces

Jazz Village JV 570034

For his seventh album as leader, the bassist has rebuilt his long-established quintet with two new members. Still on board are British pianist Andrew McCormack and trumpeter Quentin Collins, but they're now joined by Australian saxophonist Brandon Allen and London-based Cuban drummer Ernesto Simpson. Eastwood says he wanted to pay his debt to the jazz of the late 1950s and early '60s, music he'd loved since introduced to it by his famous dad, and this line-up is perfectly equipped for the task. For example, a fast and furious workout on Horace Silver's 'Blowin' The Blues Away' has Allen doing just what the title says, and there's fabulous hard-bop ensemble work from the two horns, while McCormack shines too. A treat. *SH*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



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ROBERT GLASPER

Covered

Blue Note 4724570 (CD); 4724571 (two LPs)

Ten years on, Glasper has reunited with Vicente Archer and Damion Reid, piano-trio bandmates from his first Blue Note album, *Canvas*, to record live with a studio audience. Apart from a whirligig 'Stella By Starlight', this isn't an album of jazz tunes, but one of covers from other genres. After tributes to Joni Mitchell and Radiohead comes material more familiar to Glasper's *Black Radio* fan base – for example from Bilal, who actually guested on that Blue Note debut, and hip-hopper Kendrick Lamar, who featured Glasper on his own last album. Yet a standout original here is 'Got Over', with its stunning recitative by Harry Belafonte. Glasper hopes that this album can reach both jazz and R&B audiences, and maybe it will. *SH*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100





RAMÓN VALLE

Take Off

In+Out Records IOR CD 77121-9 (CD + DVD)

The Cuban-born pianist recorded for Act in the early 2000s. But this new release for another German label is the first fruit of his collaboration with American producer/manager Suzi Reynolds. Bassist Omar Rodriguez Calvo has worked with Valle since the '90s, and the all-Cuban trio here is completed by drummer Ernesto Simpson. They open with a chopped and sliced 'All The Things You Are' and almost pause majestically midway with Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah'. But Valle's originals range from the spiralling 'Levitando', almost a signature tune, to 'Trance Dance In Blue' which convolves the blues with Latin idioms. Valle is exhilarating and he can be tender too. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



JOEY ALEXANDER

My Favorite Things

Motéma 233988

At six, at home in Bali, Joey Alexander was picking out tunes from his father's jazz record collection. At nine, he was invited by UNESCO to play solo piano for visiting celebrity Herbie Hancock. By 2014, he'd reached New York, where he made this debut recording with name players including bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Ulysses Owens Jr. So, here we have an album of jazz standards, interpreted with unerring harmonic sense and a pleasing combination of fresh melodic ideas and traditional values, put over not just with ample technique, but also with mature musicality. And all this from a pianist who is just 11 years old! *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



KENNY WHEELER

Songs For Quintet

ECM 470 4653

With a group of long-term colleagues, this Dec '13 Abbey Road session would be the celebrated trumpeter's last recording and in fact his last performance. Saxophonist Stan Sulzmann had first worked with Wheeler in the '70s, guitarist John Parricelli in the '90s. A few years later, bassist Chris Laurence could be heard alongside Sulzman and Parricelli on Wheeler's *Dream Sequence* album, while drummer Martin France became a member of Laurence's own quartet. They all support their leader ably, and stretch out too, giving new shape to some of Wheeler's favourite compositions. Rolling down a familiar sunny road, this album has a very special atmosphere. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

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Strata

Whirlwind Recordings WR4674

Despite his busy schedule with Phronesis, pianist and composer Ivo Neame has found time for other projects, notably the octet that recorded *Yatra* in 2012. For the quintet heard here, along with octet members Tori Freestone, Jim Hart and Dave Hamblett, he brought in bassist Andrea Di Biase, and worked to create a unified set of pieces in contrasting moods and styles. So you'll hear Neame adding spacey synth on the title track, or an accordion on the evocative 'Folk Song'. For Freestone's great tenor playing you could go straight to 'Miss Piggy'. But that's against the spirit of the album, which aims to engage the listener thoughout. You have to listen to it all. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



COURTNEY PINE

Song (The Ballad Book)

Destin-E Records 777102468X

Though he made his name on tenor saxophone, the 2000s have seen Courtney Pine concentrating on bass clarinet while sometimes, as on 2013's *House Of Legends*, exploiting the more declamatory quality of the soprano sax. But here, as with 2011's *Europa*, it's bass clarinet all the way. And as with that album, but this time in a duo format, the pianist is the wonderful Zoe Rahman. With sensitivity and deep harmonic understanding, she's the perfect partner, as Pine, sometimes taking off in Dolphy-like flight but more often tenderly lyrical, explores some favourite ballads. Their lovely take on 'Someday We'll All Be Free' makes a perfect ending too. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



ABDULLAH IBRAHIM

The Song Is My Story

Intuition INT34422 (CD + DVD)

When Ibrahim's solo album *Senzo* appeared in 2008, it could have been a swansong to a career that had begun in the '60s. But it was more like a new beginning, as 2010 brought a vibrant album with his group, Ekaya, and another with the WDR big band. *Mukashi* followed in 2013, with Ekaya reedsman Cleave Guyton. But this new solo album opens with Ibrahim on sax, in an arresting melody that implies the harmony even with no chords stated. Then, on piano, the lifelong influences of Ellington, Monk, *et al*, are distilled into Ibrahim's own eternal essence. And his graceful, illuminating spoken introductions on the DVD mean that for once, this really is a bonus. *SH*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

JASON MARSALIS VIBES QUARTET

The 21st Century Trad Band

Basin Street Records BSR 0304-2

When Jason followed elder brothers Branford and Wynton into music he started out on violin, quickly moving on to drums and joining father Ellis's band at a tender age before becoming a master of the vibraphone. This second album from his Vibes Qt follows 2013's *In A World Of Mallets* and on the opening 'Discipline Meets The Offbeat One' he overdubs brilliantly on almost every mallet-based instrument from marimba to tubular bells. Elsewhere, this virtuosic quartet plays as one through the most exhilarating rhythmic twists and turns. From the title track, with its updated marching beat and playful poke at 'The Saints', to the pure lyricism of 'Calm Before The Storm', this album grabs your attention and won't let go. *SH*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100





SCHUMANN

Symphonies 1-4

Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Robin Ticciati

Linn Records CKD450 (two SACDs; downloads up to 192kHz/24-bit resolution)

Those familiar with the full orchestra cycles of, say Karajan, Kubelík, Sawallisch or Szell, might resist the current trend for chamber-orchestra recordings. It would be a huge mistake to forgo Ticciati's very individual interpretations, which rank as among the most insightful to be had (far superior, to my mind, to the recent hard-driven Nézet-Séguin/DG series which others seem to like). Every detail of Schumann's scoring is clear and there's no sense of wanting more in, say the Rhine depiction in No.3. Ticciati opts for the revised Fourth and his reading withstands comparisons with the classic Furtwängler/DG – both slow the trio section of (iii) and I find the SCO tempo convincing. Great SQ as well. *CB*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas Op.31 and Op.49

Maurizio Pollini

DG 479 4325 (downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

Had DG reversed the order of the two Op.49 'Sonates faciles' you could say that Pollini's cycle has ended with a whimper (*piano*) rather than a bang (*ff*). He began recording these works in 1976 with Nos 29-32, completing the set with the three Op.31 here – not as light or witty as Kempff in the elaborated slow movement of the G major, but beautifully set out nonetheless, and quite outstanding in the D-minor, the 'Tempest'. Pollini finds humour in the two Op.49, but what is most impressive is the way he makes you aware of how *audacious* Beethoven was in his writing of the three middle-period works. Wonderful! *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



BEETHOVEN

Missa Solemnis

Genia Kühmeier, Elisabeth Kulman, Mark Padmore, Hanno Müller-Brachmann, Bavarian RSO & Ch/Bernard Haitink

BR Klassik 900130

Beethoven symphony cycles from the LPO, Concertgebouw and LSO, four piano concerto sets, *Fidelio*… but never the *Missa Solemnis* until this Sep '14 live recording, when Haitink was 85. (You can also watch it in high definition at *http://datab.us/missa%20solemnis%20haitink*.) The performance has some lovely details, like the choir's *pianissimi* – although I do regret their German pronunciation 'cr-ee-do' for 'cr-ay-do' – and of course there's nothing false or exaggerated here with Haitink the 'conduit' (the true meaning of conducting) for Beethoven's music. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



BEAMISH/DEBUSSY

The Seafarer/La Mer (arr. Beamish)

Sir Willard White, Trio Apaches

Orchid Classics ORC100043 (96kHz/24-bit at theclassicalshop)

For their debut recording, Trio Apaches asked Sally Beamish for a transcription of *La Mer* as a companion piece to *The Seafarer*: a setting of a pre-10th century poem found at Exeter Cathedral (following an account of a sea voyage, the principal theme is the mariner's spiritual life ashore). Constantly fascinating as 'reimagined' for piano trio, the Debussy works extremely well – the one spot which doesn't quite satisfy is the big tune for cellos 4m 37s into (i). Trio Apaches make the music sound very French, and it has been finely engineered at St George's, Bristol. The booklet has the texts but says too little about the Beamish piece. *CB*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



BRAHMS

Serenades 1 and 2

Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra/Riccardo Chailly

Decca 478 67775 (downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

Brahms's two orchestral Serenades (rather lesser in scope, No 2 is scored with double winds and two horns, but has no violins) were not much known until Kertesz's LSO/Decca LPs appeared in 1968; then an equally fine Boult/LPO set was issued a decade later by EMI. In the new booklet note Chailly refers to Boult's readings as providing a clue for his tempo for the long opening *Allegro Molto* of No 1. These new Leipzig recordings match the feeling of his (award-winning) 'stripped down' Brahms Symphonies cycle and this 'prequel' is gloriously played, conducted and recorded. This is a definitive coupling. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



BRAHMS/WEINER

Clarinet Quintet; Two Waltzes, etc/Two Movements

Otto Andreas Ottensamer, et al

DG/Mercury 481 1409

In the wake of a fine BIS Brahms Quintet with Martin Fröst, this new DG also finds the clarinettist in company with some 'star' string players: Leonidas Kavakos, Antoine Tamestit (vln/vla), *et al*. The expressive warmth makes a very different impression from old versions like the classically constrained Berliners on Philips or even the Vienna Octet on Decca. The theme here is Brahms's 'Hungarian connection', so we move via two *Waltzes* and *Hungarian Dances* – cimbalom joining in – and short pieces by Budapest composer Leo Weiner to a lively 'pot pourri' of traditional music, accordion now added to the group. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



CHOPIN

Piano works Vol.4 (Waltzes; Nocturnes)

Louis Lortie

Chandos CHAN 10852 (downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

Lortie likes his Chopin programmes to make a pleasing sequence, rather than a numerical one in a specific genre. So towards the end of the 21 Waltzes grouped here he intersperses four *Nocturnes*. He's playing on a pair of Fazioli F278 grands at Potton Hall (only in Vol.2 do we have a Steinway); the recordings were made in 2011, '13 and '14. There's a wonderful elegance to Lortie's Chopin. Try the E-flat, Op. Posth. B21, or the way in which the quick phrases are spun in Op.64:1 ('Minute') – never rushed – then contrasting with the inward-looking C-sharp minor *Nocturne* that follows. A lovely recital. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100

BEETHOVEN

Piano Concertos 3 and 4

Maria João Pires, Swedish RSO/Daniel Harding

Onyx 4125

Dedicating her Onyx debut CD to the memory of Abbado, Pires offers her first recordings of these two concertos. And she could not have found a better partner than Daniel Harding (remember his 1999 set of Beethoven overtures on Virgin Classics?) – the orchestral detailing is exemplary. Pires seems to be at a musical peak here, every phrase full of subtle observations; and the sound of her Steinway is wonderful. If I'd heard this coupling when I began collecting these pieces on LP I don't think I would have looked further! What's not to like? Nice artwork but a rather tight folded card container, and a note by Pires that, sadly, doesn't amount to much. Qoboz lists a 48kHz/24-bit download. *CB*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



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PROKOFIEV

Romeo and Juliet – excerpts

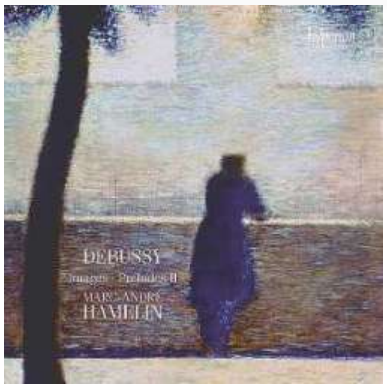
Chicago Symphony Orchestra/Riccardo Muti

CSO Resound CSOR9011402 (downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

Muti has made some excellent Prokofiev recordings with the Philharmonia and Philadelphia Orchestras [EMI and Philips] including a selection of 12 movements from the Suites from the ballet. The ten here are live/Oct 2013. Although shamelessly close-mic'd, the sound is gorgeous – every detail of Prokofiev's orchestration is captured. But then, the Chicago Orchestra is refined well beyond anything you would have found in the Solti era. The players' commitment under Muti's sophisticated command is palpable and especially lovely in the quiet music. The coda to 'Romeo At Juliet's Tomb' is especially sensitive. Highresaudio charges £2 less than other online providers! *CB*

Sound Quality: 95%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



DEBUSSY

Images 1 and 2; Préludes Book 2

Marc-André Hamelin

Hyperion CDA CKD450 (downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

The opening 'Reflets dans l'eau' sets the tone for some remarkably fluent piano-playing, recorded in the Henry Wood Hall. But it's the thoughtfulness of Hamelin's Debussy which impresses more – the technique comes as no surprise. In the *Préludes* I particularly enjoyed 'General Lavine – eccentric' and 'La Puerto del Vino'. Even so, I think there's greater depth (and no lesser pianistic control) in Arrau's *Images* and *Préludes* [Philips] – the way in which he integrated the middle section of 'Mouvement', for instance. And the aloof Michelangeli [DG] remains altogether peerless in this music. *CB*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



EL MAESTRO FARINELLI

18th century vocal and orchestral music

Bejun Mehta, Concerto Köln/Pablo Heras-Casado

Archiv 479 2050 (downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

There's some thrilling music-making here in a programme of scarcely known overtures (by Jomelli, Marcolini, Porpora, Traetta), sinfonias (CPE Bach, Johann Hasse), dances and arias (Corradini, De Nebra). The programme is based on what Carlo Broschi, *aka* the castrato Farinelli, might have introduced to the Spanish court of King Philip V. I didn't like (or review) Heras-Casado's Schubert on Harmonia Mundi but he's in his element here. And have a look at the Universal promo film with the animated counter-tenor Bejun Mehta [*http://www.deutschegrammophon.com*] and you'll have your debit card out within minutes! *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100



HAYDN

Symphonies 92 'Oxford', 93, 97-99

LSO/Sir Colin Davis

LSO Live LSO-0702 (SACD; downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

Sir Colin Davis made a very fine Amsterdam/Philips set of late Haydn symphonies for LP, and these LSO performances complement them perfectly. He really makes you appreciate anew the composer's wit, formal dexterity and skills in orchestration, in beautifully timed and paced readings recorded at The Barbican in 2010/11. The 'Oxford' is particularly outstanding. In the finale of No.98 Haydn suddenly throws the keyboard continuo into the spotlight, duetting with the leader – the harpsichord balance is good, but (contrary to claims I've read) I don't hear the continuo elsewhere in this symphony. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - - - - 100

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R STRAUSS

Also Sprach Zarathustra; Till Eulenspiegel
Philharmonia Orchestra/Lorin Maazel

Hi-Q Records HIQLP047

These were Lorin Maazel's first recordings with the orchestra, made in Kingsway Hall in June 1962 (when he was 32). It may not quite rank with the Reiner *Zarathustras* as an audiophile release but musically it is no less interesting and the coupling too shows the young conductor's individualism. Maazel's Till is a rather suave character whose exploits never become tedious! This pairing is something of a forgotten treasure in EMI's archives, with ample hall depth in the sound – even if the violin sections are, arguably, a bit forward. (The uncredited soloist in the 'Tanzlied' was probably the then leader Hugh Bean.) *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

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TCHAIKOVSKY/SHOSTAKOVICH

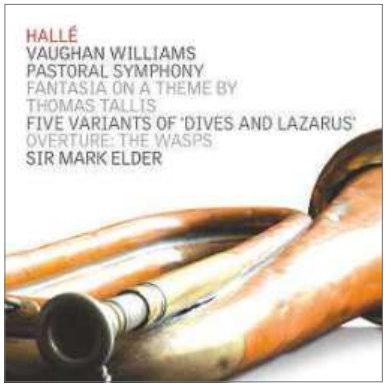
Serenade for Strings/String Quartet Op.68:2
Scottish Ensemble

Linn CKD 472 (SACD hybrid; downloads up to 192kHz/24-bit res)

This is a fresher, more imaginative Tchaikovsky *Serenade* than the recent LSO Live [*HFN* Feb '15], and although the upper strings can sound a little steely at high levels, the acoustic is cleaner. The playing is especially lovely in the slow movement and the linking section into the finale. The coupling is leader Jonathan Morton's persuasive transcription of the 1944 string quartet, rather like those by Barshai of other chamber works. It brings out the tics and themes heard in the wartime symphonies, and the solo recitatives in (ii) and (iv) are retained to telling effect. The finale has some thrilling string playing. *CB*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Symphony 3; Thomas Tallis Fantasia; The Wasps Overture; Five Variants of 'Dives and Lazarus'
Sara Fox, Hallé Orchestra/Sir Mark Elder

Hallé CD HLL 7548

If you saw the admirable BBC4 'Symphony' series with Simon Russell Beale and Sir Mark Elder you may recall discussions on VW's *Pastoral* Symphony, its premiere greeted with talk of five-barred gates and cow-pats. But in effect it encapsulated his experiences in World War I. It's perhaps the least easily grasped of the nine: not much to draw you in to (i), for example. The Hallé's playing is remarkable, while the solo trumpet and soprano passages have a beautiful perspective. The *Tallis Fantasy* is revealed in all its gloom and majesty; and the *Wasps* overture is new, not the 2010 reissued. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%

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TCHAIKOVSKY

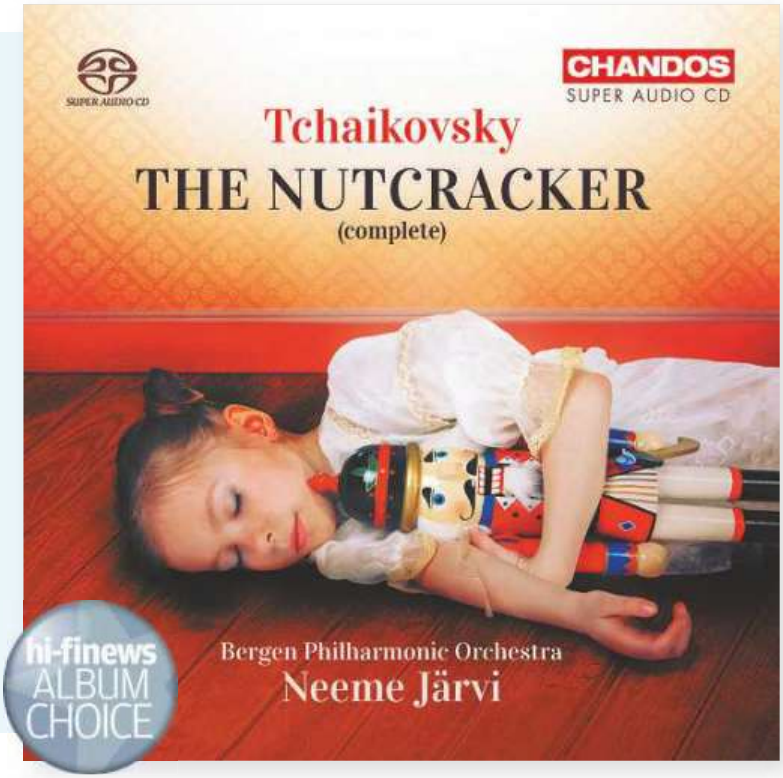
The Nutcracker
Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra/Neeme Järvi

Chandos CHSA 5144 (SACD hybrid; downloads up to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

Neeme Järvi brings down the final curtain in grand style on his Bergen ballet trilogy: *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and now this complete *Nutcracker*. It comes uninterrupted, *ie*, as a single SACD or high-res download, in excellent sound (whereas classic favourites like the Ansermet or Dorati are now long in the tooth). It's quite a driven account, which makes listening exciting, although you need to hear, by way of a complementary experience, how much Rostropovich eked out in expressiveness and inner detail in his Suites recording with the BPO [DG 449 7262]. The orchestral playing is impressive – notably the Bergen wind soloists – and there's a pleasing children's chorus. *CB*

Sound Quality: 85%

0 - - - - - - - - - 100



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Holst: The Planets
London Symphony Orchestra
André Previn



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Violin Concertos
Yehudi Menuhin/Philharmonia Orchestra/Susskind/Kurtz*



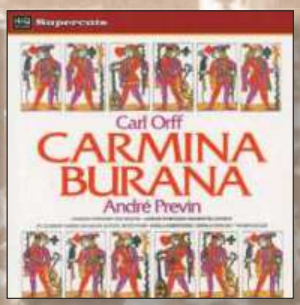
HIQLP005
English String Music:
Elgar & Vaughan Williams
Sinfonia of London
Sir John Barbirolli



HIQLP006
Beethoven: Triple Concerto
Oistrakh/Rostropovich/Richter
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra
Herbert von Karajan



HIQLP007
Tchaikovsky: 1812 Overture
Romeo & Juliet/Marche Slave
London Symphony Orchestra
André Previn



HIQLP008
Carl Orff: Carmina Burana
Armstrong/English/Allen
LSO Chorus/LSO
André Previn



HIQLP009
Bach: Violin Concertos in A minor and E minor/Double Violin Cto*
Yehudi Menuhin/Christian Ferras*
Bath Festival/Menuhin



HIQLP010
Sibelius: Symphony No.5
Finlandia
Philharmonia Orchestra
Herbert von Karajan



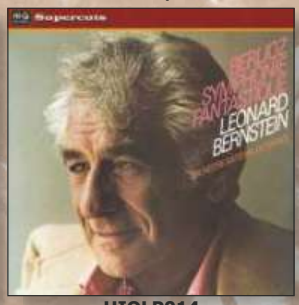
HIQLP011
André Previn's Music Night (music by Walton, Dukas, Ravel and others)
London Symphony Orchestra
André Previn



HIQLP012
Rodrigo: Concierto de Aranjuez
Fantasia para un gentilhombre
Angel Romero/London Symphony Orchestra/André Previn



HIQLP013
Mussorgsky (orch. Ravel):
Pictures From An Exhibition
Stravinsky: Firebird Suite (1919 Version)
Philadelphia Orchestra/Riccardo Muti



HIQLP014
Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique
Orchestre National de France
Leonard Bernstein



HIQLP015
Paganini: Violin Concerto No. 1
Sarasate: Carmen Fantasy/Perlman
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Lawrence Forster



HIQLP016
Dvořák: Symphony No. 9 in E Major
Smetana: The Moldau (from Má Vlast)
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra
Herbert von Karajan



HIQLP017
Fauré Requiem
King's College Choir Cambridge
New Philharmonia Orchestra
Sir David Willcocks



HIQLP018
Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 2
Sviatoslav Richter
Orchestre de Paris
Lorin Maazel



HIQLP019
Handel: Music for the Royal Fireworks
Handel: Concertos in F & D
London Symphony Orchestra
Sir Charles Mackerras



HIQLP020
Strauss: Ein Heldenleben
Symphonic Poem Op. 40
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Sir Thomas Beecham



HIQLP021
Beethoven: 7th Symphony in A
Rameau (arr. Klemperer):
Gavotte with Six Variations
New Philharmonia Orchestra
Otto Klemperer



HIQLP022
Ravel: Boléro
Daphnis & Chloé Suite No.2/Pavanne
London Symphony Orchestra
André Previn



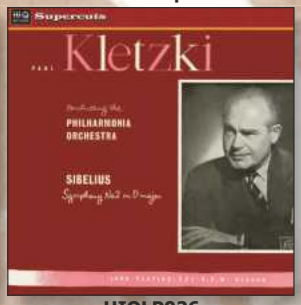
HIQLP023
Mozart: Symphony No. 40
Mozart: Symphony No. 41 'Jupiter'
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra
Herbert von Karajan



HIQLP024
Smetana: The Bartered Bride
Dvorak: Scherzo Capriccioso
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Rudolf Kempe



HIQLP025
Vivaldi: The Four Seasons
London Philharmonic Orchestra
Itzhak Perlman
(Violin & Conductor)



HIQLP026
Sibelius: Symphony No. 2 in D major
Philharmonia Orchestra
Paul Kletzki



HIQLP027
Bizet: L'Arlésienne/Carmen
Philharmonia Orchestra
Herbert von Karajan



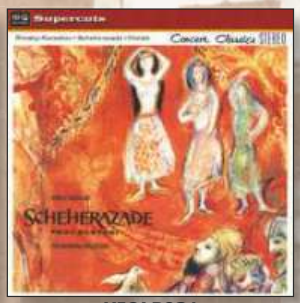
HIQLP028
Berlioz: Harold in Italy
Orchestre National de France
Leonard Bernstein



HIQLP029
Rossini: Overtures
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Sir Colin Davis



HIQLP030
Sibelius: Symphony No. 4
The Hallé Orchestra
Sir John Barbirolli



HIQLP031
Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade
Philharmonia Orchestra
Paul Kletzki



HIQLP032
Nights In Vienna
Suppé, Heuberger, Strauss, Lehár
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
Rudolf Kempe



HIQLP033
Brahms: Violin Concerto in D
Perlman (violin)
Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Carlo Maria Giulini



HIQLP034
The Academy In Concert
Albinoni, Mendelssohn, Bach, Mozart
Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields
Sir Neville Marriner



HIQLP035
Mahler: Symphony No. 1 in D
Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Carlo Maria Giulini



HIQLP036
Brahms: Symphony No. 3 in F
Brahms: 'St. Antoni Chorale'
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
Sir John Barbirolli



HIQLP037
Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1
John Ogdon (piano)
Philharmonia Orchestra
Sir John Barbirolli



HIQLP038
Telemann: Suite in A Minor, etc.
David Munrow (recorder)
Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields
Sir Neville Marriner



HIQLP039
Elgar: Enigma Variations
Cockaigne Overture
Philharmonia Orchestra
Sir John Barbirolli



HIQLP040
Schubert: Unfinished Symphony
Symphony No. 5 in B Flat
Philharmonia Orchestra
Otto Klemperer



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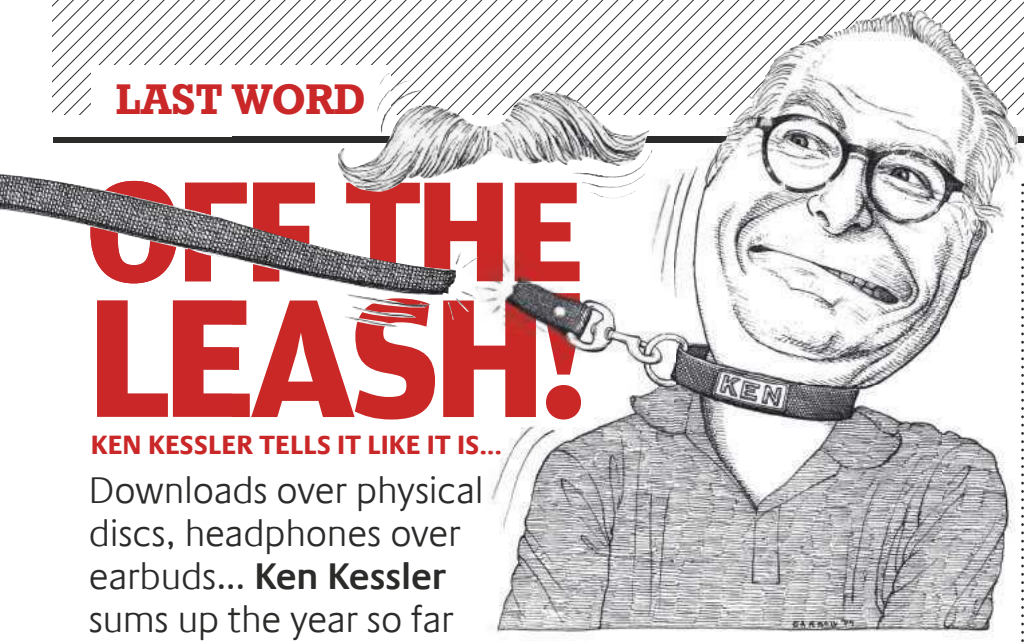
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OFF THE LEASH!



KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Downloads over physical discs, headphones over earbuds... **Ken Kessler** sums up the year so far

There are years when the high points are so obvious that round-ups seem unnecessary. This past year has seen the ascent of high-res streaming thanks to sources like Tidal. Meanwhile, according to Nielsen, a further increase in vinyl sales by 51.8% pushed global unit totals to 9.2 million LPs (2014, that is, since 2015's figures come out in mid-2016).

If the latter is still relatively insignificant compared to CDs, when CDs *dropped* to 140m or so, then far more momentous is the past year witnessing the first time that downloads passed CD. They now account for 52% of digital sales.

Every analyst seems to have reached the same conclusion: the latest generation of music lovers – arbitrarily, people have always reached the age of musical awareness and the formation of tastes and preferences between the ages of 12 and 20 – has no affinity with physical music carriers.

They don't want to fiddle with discs, let alone schlep them around; this matters because music-on-the-go is their preferred listening milieu. Add mobility to a fetish for convenience alongside the desire *not* to have a physical library and you can see why all forms of hi-fi hardware are under threat, alongside the formats that require them.

It's as inevitable as the word processor replacing the typewriter. The difference, though, is that the words produced by the former are the same as those produced by the latter. It's just that getting there was easier, *eg*, no need for Tipp-Ex.

This is not the case with sound reproduction: however much we (and by that I mean those who still care about sonic merit) try to promote sound quality, it is – pardon the expression – falling on deaf ears.

GROWTH OF QUALITY

For every child of an audiophile who followed in his or her father's hi-fi passion, a dozen couldn't give a toss. Probably the only area for optimism is the continued growth of quality headphones over earbuds. It took a while before the fashion aspect was subsumed by sound quality, but I am delighted to observe that every time I'm on the Tube, or in an airport, I see fewer Beats headphones and more and more models from brands such as B&W, Audio-Technica, Sennheiser, Sony and others on younger skulls.

> 'Wilson Audio blew my socks off with the Sabrina, its best value speaker *ever*'

Not that it was a bad year for hardware, especially turntables. TechDAS halved the price of the Air Force One with the Air Force Two, and the arrival of the Air Force Three at half the price of the 'Two, is imminent.

SME served up a masterpiece with the Model 15 [p29]: it appeared unheralded at the Munich High End Show, a perfect mid-point between Models 10 and 20, with the footprint of the former and the suspension of the latter.

Wilson Audio blew my socks off with the Sabrina, its best value loudspeaker *ever*. Naim knocked it out of the park with the Muso, arguably the best single-box music system on the market, and it's under a grand. PS Audio's Sprout and Pro-Ject's MaiA redefined what is possible in affordable integrated amplifiers for the digital era, without abandoning analogue.

Audio Research's nod to its roots, the G Series, was a design *tour de force* while Luxman and Technics returned to the market with bold recognition of the high-end's Golden Age. Sticking with retro, Quad's PA-One proved that an all-tube headphone amp with undiluted audiophile appeal is just what the headphone generation needs.

FIVE BRANDS

Aaah, headphones! We were inundated with masterpieces, but five brands stood out for me: AudioQuest's terrific first-ever headphone in the NightHawk, as well as more USB accessories to make music via computer more palatable and affordable; Oppo for the wonderful combination of headphone and matching headphone amps, the HA-2 [p74]; B&W's continued expansion of its range with models that maintain the looks, comfort and quality of the original P5; Master & Dynamic coming out of nowhere with headphones so steampunk-cool-looking that it's hard to believe they're also affordable; and Audeze, for some of the best-sounding headphones, period.

I thought we'd had enough losses this past year, with mastering genius Doug Sax, co-founder of Aragon Paul Rosenfield and reviewers Rob Reina and Tony Bolton among them. One might cast heavenward, '*Genug ist genug*' – 'Enough is enough.'

Alas, days before writing this, I learned we'd lost another master of LP cutting, the great Stan Ricker. Is this is the Reaper's way of saying that the LP revival has also reached the Hereafter – or should that be Hearafter? – and he just wants the best for himself. I like to think that SME's Alastair Robertson-Aikman and Koetsu's Sugano-san are up there thinking, 'The gang's all here.'

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Another artist would say: if it looks right, it is right. Or perhaps that should be…if it looks right, it sounds right.



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